

Introduction to *Constructing the World*

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In 1814, Pierre-Simon Laplace wrote:

An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.

Laplace suggests that given the right basic information, and sufficiently powerful reasoning, all truths about the universe can be determined. For Laplace, this basic information included truths about the fundamental laws of physics and truths about the location of all fundamental entities at a time. Let us call these the *Laplacean truths*. The reasoning requires an idealized “vast enough intellect”, now commonly known as Laplace’s demon. We might call such an intellect a *Laplacean intellect*.

Then Laplace’s text says that if a Laplacean intellect knew all the Laplacean truths, it would be uncertain of nothing. In effect, Laplace is saying that for any proposition that the demon can entertain, the demon will not be uncertain about that proposition. Or in a small variation: for any proposition the demon can entertain, the demon will be in a position to know whether it is true.

Suppose that there will be an election tomorrow. I can entertain the proposition that the left-wing candidate will win, the proposition that the right-wing candidate will win, and the proposition that the third-party candidate will win. If Laplace’s thesis is right, a Laplacean demon in my shoes will be able to know which if any of these propositions is true. If the left-wing candidate will win, the demon will be in a position to know it; if the right-wing candidate will win, the demon will be in a position to know it; if the third-party candidate will win, the demon will be in a position to know it.

Laplace's thesis is an instance of what I call a *scrutability* thesis. It says that the world is in a certain sense comprehensible, at least given a certain class of basic truths about the world. In particular, it says that all truths about the world are *scrutable* from some basic truths. This means roughly that there is a connection in the realm of knowledge between the basic truths and all the rest: given the basic truths, the rest of the truths can be determined.

We might then put a version of Laplace's thesis as follows:

Laplacean Scrutability: For all true propositions p , a Laplacean intellect who knew all the Laplacean truths would be in a position to know that p .

In the years since Laplace wrote, Laplace's demon has come in for something of a battering. But for all this, I think that there is much value in Laplace's pregnant idea. One can extract some of the value by examining the problems, and by reformulating the scrutability thesis in a way that avoids them.

One sort of problem arises from the information that Laplace allows in the base. Most famously, the indeterminism in quantum mechanics suggests that the demon could not predict the future just from information about physical laws and about the present. Futures in which any of the three candidates win may all be left open, given the right sort of quantum-mechanical evolution.

There are other limitations. Many have argued that complete physical information is not enough to know all truths about the mind: if Laplace's demon has never experienced colors, for example, it will not know what it is like to see red. Others have argued that complete objective information is not enough to determine perspectival truths about the current time, or one's own identity: even given complete physical information, Laplace's demon might not know that today is Tuesday.

To avoid these problems, however, we need only give Laplace's demon more information than Laplace allows. To avoid problems with indeterminism, we might give the demon information about all fundamental physical entities across space and time. To avoid problems about the mind and about the self, we might give the demon information about consciousness or the principles governing it, along with information about its own location in spacetime. It is not clear precisely what information is required, but here the key claim is that if we expand from the Laplacean truths to some other limited set of truths, the problems will be avoided.

We might say that a *compact* class of truths is a set of truths that involves only a limited class of concepts (and that avoids trivializing mechanisms such as coding the entire state of the world into a single number). I will elaborate on this rough characterization in the next chapter, but the

class of physical truths will be a compact class, as will the somewhat expanded class of truths above. We might then put a generalized Laplacean thesis as follows:

Inferential Scrutability: There is a compact class of truths such that for all true propositions p , a Laplacean intellect who knew all the truths in that class would be in a position to know that p .

In the Inferential Scrutability thesis, as with Laplace's more specific thesis, the idea is that if the demon knew all the basic truths, it could come to know all the truths, perhaps by inference from those basic truths. This in effect requires that the demon inhabits the same world it is trying to know, knows all the basic truths about it, and comes to know all truths from there.

This requirement gives rise to a second sort of problem for Laplace's demon. A number of paradoxes threaten, all tied to the need for the demon to know all about the processes underlying its own state of knowledge. There are paradoxes of complexity: the demon's mind needs to be as complex as the whole universe, even though it is just one part of the universe. There are paradoxes of prediction: the demon will be able to predict its own actions, and then perhaps try to act contrary to them. And there are paradoxes of knowability: if there is any truth q that the demon never comes to know, perhaps because it never entertains q , then it seems that the demon could never know the true proposition that q is a truth that it does not know.

To avoid these paradoxes we can think of the demon as lying outside the universe in question. Or better, we can think of the demon as contemplating the universe conditionally: *if* the Laplacean truths obtain, *then* this is what follows. Even if our own world does not contain a demon, we can still contemplate what a demon could come to know about our world, if it were given the relevant information in conditional form. Then the demon need not worry about the processes underlying its own state of knowledge in its own world. This contrasts with the previous inferential version of the thesis, which requires that the demon knows the basic truths about its own world.

Conditional Scrutability: There is a compact class of truths such that for all true propositions p , a Laplacean intellect would be in a position to know that if the truths in that class obtain, then p .

We can make one final change. A key element of Laplace's idea is that the Laplacean truths are *all* the truths that the demon needs. No other empirical information is needed for the demon to do its job. Here, the idea is that to know the conditional above—*if* the basic truths hold, then

p holds—the demon does not need any empirical information in the background. In principle, the demon could know the conditional a priori: that it, the demon could know it with justification independent of experience. We might put this as follows.

A Priori Scrutability: There is a compact class of truths such that for all true propositions p , a Laplacean intellect would be in a position to know a priori that if the truths in that class obtain, then p .

The three preceding theses are all ways of articulating the thesis of scrutability: that there is a compact class of basic truths from which all truths can be determined, given sufficiently powerful reasoning. The A Priori Scrutability thesis will be my central focus in much of what follows, but all three theses will play an important role.

All sorts of questions immediately arise. How can the scrutability thesis be made precise? Why should we believe it, and how can one argue for it? Just which truths are among the basic truths, and how small can the basis be? What about hard cases, such as knowledge of social truths, or moral truths, or mathematical truths? What does the scrutability thesis tell us about language, thought, knowledge, and reality? All of these questions are pursued in this book.

I suspect that to many readers, the scrutability thesis will seem obvious. I hope that it at least seems plausible to many more. But to paraphrase Russell, philosophy is the art of moving from obvious premises to interesting conclusions. There are many interesting conclusions downstream from scrutability. Of course the thesis does not do everything that Laplace's stronger thesis could do. If a demon is given physical truths over all of spacetime to start with, for example, then its ability to predict the future is much less impressive. I think that nevertheless, the thesis is powerful, because of its many applications.

Applications to epistemology, the study of knowledge, are perhaps the most obvious. For example, the scrutability thesis is at least a cousin of the knowability thesis, the thesis that all truths can be known. I will argue later that a version of the scrutability thesis can help with the problem of skepticism about the external world.

There are also applications in many other areas. In metaphysics, specific versions of the scrutability thesis can be used to help determine what is true and what is fundamental. In the philosophy of science, the scrutability thesis can be used to shed light on reductive explanation and the unity of science. In the philosophy of mind, the scrutability thesis can be used to shed light on primitive concepts and on the content of thought. And perhaps most importantly, the thesis has

powerful applications in the philosophy of language, helping us to analyze notions of meaning and content that are tied to thought and knowledge.

In fact, the scrutability framework bears directly on many of the central debates in philosophy. One version of the thesis can be used to defend a Fregean approach to meaning (an analysis of meaning grounded in rationality and the a priori) over a purely Russellian approach (an analysis grounded in reference and the external world). Another can be used to defend internalism about mental content, defining a sort of content that is largely intrinsic to the subject, against a strong externalism on which all content depends on the environment. Another can be used as a key premise in an argument against materialism about consciousness. Another can be used to deflate many traditional skeptical arguments about knowledge. Another can be used to support a version of structural realism about science. The relevant versions of the thesis differ in various ways from one another, so the issues do not all stand and fall together.¹ But in different ways, these issues all come down to scrutability.

The scrutability framework tends to counteract trends in post-1950 philosophy in a number of areas: direct reference theories of meaning, externalism about mental content, and rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. In various respects, it helps to support ideas from an earlier era in philosophy. It supports Gottlob Frege's distinction between sense and reference, and helps provide a concrete account of what Fregean senses are. It coheres well with Bertrand Russell's ideas about constructions and about the role of acquaintance in thought and knowledge. And above all, it provides support for many key ideas of the great logical empiricist, Rudolf Carnap.

In many ways, Carnap is the hero of this book. Like the other twentieth-century logical empiricists, he is often dismissed as a proponent of a failed research program. But I am inclined to think that Carnap was fundamentally right more often than he was fundamentally wrong. I do not think that he was right about everything, but I think that many of his ideas have been underappreciated. So one might see this project, in part, as aiming for a sort of vindication.

The title of this book is an homage to Carnap's 1928 book *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*, usually translated as either *The Logical Construction of the World* or *The Logical Structure of the World*. The title (like Carnap's?) should be heard as self-consciously absurd. I am not really constructing the world, any more than Carnap was. But one can see the current book as trying

¹The application to Fregeanism requires a generalization of the A Priori Scrutability thesis already stated, while the other four applications respectively involve what I later call Narrow, Fundamental, Nomic, and Structural Scrutability respectively. The first application is outlined in the tenth excursus, and the other four applications are discussed in and around chapter 8.

to carry off a version of Carnap's project in the *Aufbau*: roughly, constructing a blueprint of the world, or at least providing a vocabulary in which such a blueprint can be given. The aim is to specify the structure of the world in the form of certain basic truths from which all truths can be derived. To do this, I think one has to expand Carnap's class of basic truths and change the derivation relation, just as we had to for Laplace. But with these changes made, I think that the project is viable and that some of the spirit of the *Aufbau* remains intact.

I did not set out to write a Carnapian book. Instead, the connections between my project and Carnap's crept up on me, to the point where they could not be ignored. The connections go beyond the *Aufbau*. The approach to Fregean sense in terms of intensions is very much a descendant of Carnap's approach in *Meaning and Necessity*. The reply to Quine in chapter 5 can be seen as an adaptation of Carnap's analysis in "Meaning and Synonymy in Natural Language". The pragmatism about terminology and conceptual frameworks in chapter 9 is recognizably Carnapian. The approaches to the unity of science, to skepticism, and to inferentialism (in the eleventh, thirteenth, and fifteenth excursions) all have something in common with different elements of Carnap's work. In some cases I was not conscious of the connection to Carnap until well into the process, but his presence here is clear all the same.

I should not overstate the extent to which my views and my motivations are Carnap's. I am not a logical empiricist or a logical positivist. I do not share Carnap's verificationism or his sometime phenomenalism. Where Carnap invokes a semantic notion of analyticity, I invoke an epistemological notion of apriority. Logic plays a less central role for me than for Carnap, and unlike him, I eschew explicit definitional constructions. My views on the mind-body problem would have horrified Carnap. Where Carnap saw the *Aufbau* as an attempt to make the content of science wholly objective and communicable, science serves less as a motivation for me, and my version of the project has subjective and nonstructural elements right in the base.

So this book picks up only on certain strands in Carnap, and not on his project as a whole. To oversimplify, one might say that where Carnap leans toward empiricism, I lean toward rationalism. The project as a whole might be seen as a sort of Carnapian rationalism. To some, that label might seem oxymoronic, but this just brings out that there is more to Carnap than traditional caricatures may suggest.

That said, I would like to think that those who share more of Carnap's empiricism than I do will find that there are still many elements of the current picture that they can accept. Later in the book, I discuss ways in which a version of this project might be used to vindicate something quite close to the Carnapian picture, coming as close as possible to the structural and definitional

picture in the *Aufbau*.

Here is roughly what happens in this book. Chapter 1 introduces the project using the *Aufbau* as a guide. I go over various objections to the *Aufbau*, and sketch a version of the project that has the potential to overcome all these objections. This chapter in effect motivates and gives an overview of the project of the book as a whole. Chapter 2 goes over preliminaries, formulating scrutability theses in detail and addressing a number of other preliminary issues.

Chapters 3 and 4 mount the core arguments for scrutability. I argue for a limited scrutability thesis concerning the scrutability of all “ordinary truths” from a certain base. Chapter 3 focuses on Inferential and Conditional Scrutability, using a hypothetical device that I call the Cosmoscope to make things vivid. Chapter 4 extends these arguments to A Priori Scrutability. Many epistemological issues come up along the way in these chapters, and numerous objections are addressed.

Chapter 5 uses the framework to respond to Quine’s arguments against analyticity and apriority, by providing an analysis of conceptual change. Along the way, it develops a notion of meaning inspired by Carnap and grounded in the scrutability framework. Chapter 6 extends the arguments of chapters 3 and 4 to the scrutability of all truths, by considering various “hard cases” such as mathematical truths, normative truths, intentional truths, ontological truths, and many others.

Chapters 7 and 8 investigate the character of a scrutability base. Chapter 7 tries to whittle down the base to to the smallest possible class, proceeding through various domains to see whether they involve primitive concepts and need to be in the base or whether they can be eliminated. Chapter 8 builds on this to investigate the prospects for certain principled scrutability theses, in part to see to what extent the projects of Carnap and Russell can be vindicated, and in part to develop various applications. I see these two chapters as perhaps the central chapters of the book. Chapter 7 goes over many fascinating issues concerning what should be in the base, while chapter 8 gives a sense of the upshot and rewards of the project. A summation after chapter 8 summarises the prospects for *Aufbau*-like projects, arguing that projects in the spirit of Carnap and Russell look surprisingly good.

Chapter 9 focuses on verbal disputes, using a version of the framework as a tool for helping to resolve philosophical debates by boiling them down to their most basic elements. It also develops an approach to primitive concepts and to analyticity grounded in the dialectical notion of a verbal dispute. This helps to analyze more fine-grained counterparts of the scrutability relation. A coda addresses the question of how various scrutability thesis, if true, might be explained.

Along the way, a series of excursuses (two after most chapters and the coda) explore all sorts of connected issues. “Excursus” is usefully ambiguous between “a detailed discussion of a par-

ticular point in a book, usually in an appendix” and “a digression in a written text”. Some of my excursuses are detailed discussions of specific points: sometimes developing detailed analyses of notions that the framework needs (3-7, 13, 14), sometimes addressing specific worries for the framework in depth (8, 9). Other excursuses are digressions: sometimes connecting the discussion to issues in the philosophical literature (1, 2, 15), and sometimes developing applications (10-12 and 16-20). While it is quite possible to read the excursuses in order along with the rest of the book, they can be read in many different ways too, and they can also be skipped as the reader pleases. Many of the excursuses (especially those toward the end) were written after the rest of the book and could be much more well-worked-out, but I hope that it enriches the book to have some discussion of the relevant issues.

I have been asked a few times what area of philosophy this book falls into. The answer is not obvious, even to me. The book is an unholy stew of epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind, with some philosophy of science and metaphilosophy thrown in along the way. But it approaches each of these areas in a distinctive way and with the other areas in mind.

Scrutability theses concern knowledge, so epistemology is at the heart of the project here. But the analysis of knowledge, justification, and related notions, which form the core of contemporary epistemology, are only occasionally in focus here. Rather, I am doing a sort of *metaphysical epistemology* (or should that be epistemological metaphysics?): roughly, epistemology in service of a global picture of the world and of our conception thereof.

The metaphysical epistemology in this book breaks down into a number of components. To a first approximation, the early chapters (especially 3 and 4) focus on *global epistemology*: articulating and supporting general theses about what can be known and about the epistemological relations between truths about the world. The middle part of the book (especially chapter 5 and thereabouts) focuses on *epistemological semantics*: understanding notions of meaning and content that are tied to epistemological notions such as rationality and the a priori. The latter part of the book (chapter 7 onward) focuses on *conceptual metaphysics*: roughly, investigating the structure of our conception of reality, with one eye on how well this structure corresponds to reality itself.

The global epistemology in the early chapters serves as the motor that drives the arguments for scrutability for those who are skeptical. Scrutability theses can be seen as global epistemological theses akin to knowability theses and the like. I start by articulating these theses, and then try to argue for them in detail. Along the way, a lot of epistemology takes place: epistemological issues about warrant, self-doubt, idealization, skepticism, conditionalization, evidence, recognitional ca-

pacities, inference, and the a priori take centre stage.

The conceptual metaphysics of chapters 7 and 8 serves as the heart of the book, giving a sense of the full picture that emerges for those who are sympathetic. Here the aim is to boil down our conception of reality to its most basic elements, isolating primitive elements in which our concepts are grounded, and to draw out consequences for mind, language, and reality. Chapter 9 pushes this project further from a different direction, and the sixteenth excursus draws out the application to issues in pure metaphysics. That excursus also fleshes out the project of conceptual metaphysics, and connects the epistemological notion of scrutability to the related metaphysical notions of supervenience and grounding.

The epistemological semantics of chapter 5 and the excursuses that follow gives a sense of one important application of the framework. Chapter 5 serves to motivate the framework of epistemically possible scenarios and intensions defined over them. The eighth excursus develops the modal framework in more detail. The tenth excursuses develop the semantic framework a little further, and argues that the intensions so defined can play many of the key roles of Fregean senses. In chapter 8, I argue that these intensions can serve as a sort of narrow content of thought.

The semantic applications of the framework are developed much further in a forthcoming companion volume, *The Multiplicity of Meaning*. Where this book starts with Carnap, that book starts with Frege, developing a Fregean approach to language and an internalist approach to thought. Here the framework of epistemic two-dimensional semantics, which is itself grounded in the framework of scrutability, plays a central role. The books are written so that either can be read independently of the other, but I think that they work especially well together. They can be read in either order, proceeding either from epistemological foundations to semantic applications or vice versa.

I expect that there will also be a third book at some point, exploring related issues about modality and metaphysics. That book will develop the framework of epistemically possible scenarios, explore its relationship to the space of metaphysically possible worlds, and explore connections to related metaphysical issues. Between them, these three books can be seen as forming a sort of trilogy on the three vertices of the “golden triangle” of reason, meaning, and modality.

The ideas in these books have grown very indirectly out of some ideas in my 1996 book *The Conscious Mind*. An early version of the scrutability thesis is explored in Chapter 2 of that book, as is a version of the two-dimensional semantic framework that plays a central role in *The Multiplicity of Meaning*. Some of the central themes in the early chapters got their initial airing in the 2001 article “Conceptual Analysis and Reductive Explanation”, co-authored with Frank

Jackson, an article that was at least putatively driven by issues about the mind–body problem.

Despite this connection, it would be a mistake to think of this book as intended mainly to provide a foundation for arguments about the metaphysics of consciousness. In this book, purely metaphysical issues (conceptual metaphysics aside) are most often in the background, while epistemological and semantic issues are in the foreground. In a few places I have articulated theses that might connect the epistemology to the metaphysics (notably the Fundamental Scrutability and Apriority/Necessity theses), but I have not tried to argue for them at any length. I have devoted much more energy to arguing for weaker scrutability theses that even thoroughgoing physicalists can accept. The stronger theses and associated metaphysical issues come into focus briefly in chapter 8 and the sixteenth excursus, but they will be more central in the book on modality mentioned above.

It would be somewhat closer to the mark to think of this book as intended to provide a foundation for the ideas about two-dimensional semantics that I have developed in other work. It has gradually become clear to me that the key issue here is scrutability: once a relevant scrutability thesis is accepted, the epistemic two-dimensional framework follows. In fact, this book started its life as a chapter or two in *The Multiplicity of Meaning*, before taking on a life of its own. Still, by now I think that the scrutability thesis has interest for all sorts of purposes, and that while the applications to the theory of meaning are important, there are certainly many others as well.

I have tried not to assume too much in the way of theoretical principles from the start. Instead, I have tried to proceed by working through cases and mounting arguments to see what sort of theses emerge at the other side. In this way my approach differs from that of Carnap in the *Aufbau*, who starts with a strong structuralist thesis at the start. I was tempted to write another version of this book, one that first articulates one of the principled scrutability theses in chapter 8 and then uses it to drive a construction from the ground up while also defending it from objections. That principled approach would have been more theoretically elegant and cohesive. But the relatively unprincipled approach of the current book has the advantage of letting the chips fall where they may. This way, by the end of the book we are in a position to judge the prospects for numerous different principled approaches.

Of course I do not proceed with complete philosophical neutrality. There is no such thing, and the discussion here is inevitably filtered through my own philosophical sensibilities. Still, I have tried to acknowledge alternative viewpoints where I can, to find a way for them to come at least part of the way with me if possible, to argue against them where I can, and to see where they will get off the bus if they must.

My conclusions tend in a direction contrary to the conclusions of some of the most famous arguments in recent philosophy: Quine's arguments against analyticity and the a priori, Kripke's arguments against descriptivism, Putnam's and Burge's arguments against internalism. In these cases I consider the arguments against these traditional views directly, sometimes rebutting them, and sometimes accepting aspects of them but arguing that their conclusions are limited. I generally take it that the traditional views in question (internalism, belief in the a priori, and so on) have a sort of default status, so that if they are to be rejected it must be on the basis of argument. As a result, if someone is entirely unsympathetic with these views, not as a matter of argument but as a matter of starting point, then I do not know how much I will do to bring them around. But I am happy enough for now with the conclusion that if these views (or the relatives of them that I accept) are wrong, it is for interestingly different reasons.

More generally, it will not surprise me if some of the key conclusions in this book are wrong. Even if ideal reasoners can be certain of the philosophical truth, I am not an ideal reasoner. But I hope that if I am wrong, it is not for old reasons, or not only for old reasons, but also for new and interesting reasons that lead to new and interesting philosophy.

I think of the scrutability thesis as supporting a sort of philosophical optimism. Conditional on knowledge of certain fundamental truths and ideal reasoning, everything can be known. In particular, this means that any failures of philosophical knowledge can be ascribed either to the non-ideality of our reasoning or to our ignorance of fundamental truths. Now, it is far from clear to what extent the fundamental truths are knowable, and it is far from clear to what extent we approach the ideal in relevant respects. Still, it is also far from clear that fundamental truths are beyond our grasp, and it is far from clear that reasoning that is needed to determine philosophical truths is beyond our grasp. Philosophy is still young, and the human capacity for reasoning is strong. In a scrutable world, truth may be within reach.