

Metaphysics and its Distinctive Problem

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider metaphysics, characterizing a unified discipline that provides the basis for all inquiry. This discipline has a distinctive problem, one that arises from the needs of a metaphysical theory to be *comprehensive* and *general*, yet unremittingly *critical*. In light of this characterization of metaphysics and its unique problem, I critique alternative approaches to metaphysics in contemporary discussions in order to determine whether those that would deflate metaphysics undermine the account of the discipline I propose, and whether those that endorse an ambitious discipline can contribute to resolving its distinctive problem. I conclude that neither is the case. This makes pressing the need for a novel methodology in metaphysics.

§I. What Metaphysics Is

Despite common roots, there has not been, in Western philosophy, a unique enterprise that is *metaphysics*. In two and a half millennia, many projects, with different motivations and incompatible bases, have been undertaken as metaphysics. These projects, of course, have some similarities, sharing a concern with large-scale features of reality or questions of primordial interest, but these similarities do not suffice to characterize a *discipline*, a focused domain of inquiry with a methodology. There is, therefore, no one activity that metaphysics has been. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to characterize a discipline that, given its scope and foundational role for all other inquiry, is appropriately taken to be metaphysics. Inquiry in this discipline might heretofore not have been undertaken. Still, I call it ‘metaphysics’. The name, however, is not important; as a term of art, ‘metaphysics’ can be (and has been) used as one chooses. Regardless of what it is called, the discipline I characterize is worth pursuing, having much inherent interest, as well as practical import.

The discipline begins with *the world*, the totality encompassing one. There is, no doubt, *reality*, that is, the world. What is less obvious—much less so—is what the world is or what its most basic features are. It is not clear whether the world is itself a thing, a natured entity; an instance of some kind or sui generis; a complex yet unified entity; a congruous collection of dependent entities; a mere collection of

dependent entities; a mere collection of disparate entities; or something else entirely. To the extent that it is unclear whether the world is even a thing, it is unclear whether the world itself has features, basic or otherwise. I maintain that metaphysics is fruitfully regarded as the discipline whose primary objective is an account of *what the world is and what it comprises*.

Some account of what the world comprises is needed, for reality is, if anything, heterogeneous, and so by some measure complex. Consequently, a metaphysical account of the world, which as an account of the totality that encompasses one must be all-inclusive, need be general, as well. It must both acknowledge differences, thereby indicating whence this heterogeneity arises, but also overlook them, in order to provide some insight into what *anything* whatsoever is—including the world itself, if it be a thing. The account need provide insight into how exactly these things exist together as the world or so as to make it up. Thus, the primary question of a discipline directed at providing an account of what the world is and what it comprises is what a *thing* is. This understanding of metaphysics is meant to be consonant with platitudes like metaphysics is “inquiry into the most basic and general features of reality”¹ and the “systematic study of the most fundamental structure of reality.”² Yet it is also meant to suggest the means of illuminating such claims, which though very familiar are nonetheless elusive. An account of what a thing is illuminates the pivotal notions of being basic, that is, *fundamentality*, and of *structure* (as I argue elsewhere³). Without a clear understanding of these notions, one cannot discern the focus of an inquiry appropriately taken to be metaphysics.

So echt metaphysics is directed at an account of what the world is via the question of what a thing is. There are also investigations that are *metaphysical*, though not metaphysics. Such investigations are directed at obtaining a suitably general account of something (or some kind of thing) in the world, rather than reality at large. There are projects in, for example, the metaphysics of persons, the metaphysics of

¹ Kim and Sosa 1999: ix.

² Lowe 1998: 2.

³ See Fiocco (unpublished).

value, the metaphysics of mind, the metaphysics of modality, the metaphysics of time. Perhaps *every* field of inquiry is metaphysical in this sense, and so biology can be understood as the metaphysics of living things, physics the metaphysics of matter, economics the metaphysics of markets, sociology the metaphysics of institutions. All these specific projects and fields must be consistent with each other, for insofar as each is directed at something real, their objects coexist and contribute to the one world. Moreover, and importantly, since each is directed at something—some *thing*—in the world, the theories these projects and fields yield must comport with the metaphysical account of reality, because this account being all-inclusive and general is supposed to elucidate what a thing of any variety is. Hence, metaphysics is foundational, providing the ground rules for any investigation, and so is crucial to inquiry itself.

Inquiry, in the main, is presumably directed, via non-representational things in the world, at true propositions, for the purpose of inquiry is to obtain correct attitudes regarding the world. These correct attitudes, reliably obtained or appropriately justified, are *knowledge*. So inquiry is epistemic, but also significantly ontological in that it is engaged with and based on what is the case, what exists in the world. The purpose of *critical inquiry*, unlike inquiry more generally is to attain *understanding* of a certain subject matter, rather than merely some knowledge pertaining to it. Understanding can be attained by recognizing how propositions are true, why certain propositions are true together and whether they need be. Such understanding seems to require, then, an explanation of the truth of true propositions, that is, an account of what in the world makes a proposition true, and some corollary account of the relations between these grounds of true propositions. Deeper understanding of some subject matter can be acquired with accounts of how the true propositions pertinent to that subject matter relate to other, ostensibly unrelated ones and whether they must. If a *theoretical framework* is a collection of principles, of propositions consistency with which is taken to guide inquiry into some subject matter, then inquiry can take place by means of an unexamined theoretical framework. Critical inquiry, however, cannot.

Simply taking propositions for granted—even one’s principles—failing to examine how they are true or why true together (and whether they need be) is incompatible with the understanding that is the goal of critical inquiry.

Given that there is indeed a world, “it” is either a thing or not. There must be, therefore, some account of what the world is, or why reality is not a thing, and so there must be a sort of inquiry whose primary objective is this account. In other words, there must be the discipline that I characterize above as metaphysics. Merely a true account of what the world is—in the absence of some further account of how these propositions about the world are true, why they are true together and whether they need be—would be incomplete, missing crucial details about what the world is; hence, metaphysics must be a form of critical inquiry. Note there are no presuppositions here about how the account of what the world is can or must be obtained, nor any conditions on this account (beyond its all-inclusive generality). This characterization of metaphysics is minimal, motivated simply by the irrefragable claim that there is a heterogeneous world, and defined only by its object—an account of what the world is (and what it comprises)—yet, with this object, the characterization is appropriately weighty.

This minimal, yet weighty account of metaphysics seems to me wholly uncontroversial. One may have no interest in metaphysics or have a dim view of its prospects (though at the outset such pessimism can hardly be justified), but there is no denying there is such a discipline. Given that it is foundational, insofar as one has an interest in any field—in any inquiry—one has a reason to pursue this discipline; any insight into anything in the world depends on it. However, if this is what metaphysics is, it has a distinctive problem.

§II. The Distinctive Problem of Metaphysics

As noted above, metaphysics begins with the world. It does not begin with any text, figure or tradition. Its focus is, in part, immediately accessible to any inquirer, in any circumstance. Metaphysics

is, therefore, unique among fields of inquiry in that at any point in pursuing it, one can, whenever lost, begin anew with the focus of inquiry no less clear or further away. As a form of critical inquiry, metaphysics is incompatible with dogma, which in this context is any claim about the world not appropriately justified. Given the ubiquity of its focus and the breadth of the threat of dogma, it is not surprising that metaphysics has a distinctive problem. The objective of metaphysics is a comprehensively general account of what the world is (and what it comprises); as a form of critical inquiry, metaphysics is to provide understanding and not merely knowledge. This objective with this critical requirement present a conundrum.

Successful inquiry yields a true theory. In the case of metaphysics, this would be a comprehensively general (true) account of what the world is and what it comprises. Since metaphysics is critical, however, its principles, the propositions that make up the theoretical framework for this account (such as, perhaps, *that there is a heterogeneous world* and *that something exists*) cannot be taken for granted; the justification and grounds of each must be assessed. But, and this is the crux of the problem, there seems to be nothing independent of the metaphysical account of reality—and certainly no further theory—against which to evaluate its principles. As noted above, any metaphysical project, even every field of inquiry, must comport with the overarching metaphysical account of reality, so any theory that results from a specific project must be consistent with the theoretical framework that yields this general account. Hence, the principles of the overarching account are not suitably assessed against any theory arising from some more specific project, or even all of them together, for all these theories are supposed to be consistent with the former. Given that the overarching account of reality is comprehensive, providing insight into what anything whatsoever is, there is no more general theory against which to assess the theoretical framework of this account.

Furthermore, because the claims it makes about each thing are so general, everything confirms the metaphysical account of reality; indeed, it is not even possible for there to be something that fails to

confirm the account (such a “thing” would not be an existent). The great differences that surely exist among things are beyond the purview of the general account; regardless of how things in the world are specifically, they would confirm this account. Therefore, literally anything and any (true) claim adduced in support of the overarching metaphysical account of reality is subsumed by it. In providing insight into everything and informing every claim about the world, this account is prior to any such consideration, and so there is nothing and no theory against which to contrast it. However, without such independent considerations, which can serve as a basis for evaluating its principles, there seems to be no way to assess the overarching metaphysical account. Without assessment, it cannot provide understanding.

The distinctive problem of metaphysics, therefore, is this: the objective of metaphysics is a critical account of what the world is and what it comprises, an overarching theory of reality that provides some insight into what anything whatsoever is, but given the scope of this account, there are no means independent of it by which to evaluate it; however, understanding, the purpose of a critical account, requires at least some evaluation. The problem is unique to metaphysics because for every other field of inquiry that produces a theory, there is some theory more general than it—or in some way independent of it—that can serve as a check on the circumscribed one. Furthermore, every field of inquiry other than metaphysics makes specific claims about certain things in the world; the theories produced by such fields can then be evaluated by whether these specific claims are true. Yet this is not the case for metaphysics, which is all-inclusive. This distinctive problem was adumbrated above, when it was observed that metaphysics provides the ground rules for any investigation and so is crucial to inquiry itself. Metaphysics, however, is itself a form of inquiry and so it follows that it, somehow, informs itself. This suggests—misleadingly, as I argue—that the discipline really has no ground rules, for if a discipline informs itself, by providing its own rules, the initial choice of these rules seems unconstrained. It is not clear how even to begin primary metaphysical inquiry.

In light of all this, any theory of metaphysics seems open to the charge of arbitrariness: if there are no means of assessing such theories, there is no basis to choose among them. (The principles of any given theory cannot even be assessed for plausibility without the presupposition of other principles which themselves would require evaluation.) Insofar as the most basic features of reality are supposed to be reflected in the theoretical framework of a theory of metaphysics, there seems to be no means to settle disagreement between metaphysicians who posit different features, and so accept different principles. A theory of metaphysics can perhaps be assessed on the basis of its internal coherence, but this does not provide the means for choosing among incompatible yet internally coherent theories. Worse, assessing a theory of metaphysics merely on the basis of its coherence cuts it off from what the theory is supposed to be a theory of, namely, the world. It appears, then, there cannot be a genuinely critical metaphysics, one that provides a comprehensively general account of what the world is but also permits understanding of the theoretical framework of this account. Thus, the distinctive problem of metaphysics calls into the question the very possibility of a fruitful or otherwise worthwhile discipline.

§III. A Critique of Contemporary Metaphysical Inquiry

I do think that metaphysics can be fruitful: it can illuminate every other field of inquiry and is crucial to understanding any discipline, regardless of its focus. In order to do this, however, its distinctive problem must be addressed. The better to do this, I first discuss several alternative approaches to metaphysics, some that dismiss it or deflate it as a discipline, others that recognize its centrality to inquiry. I consider the former in order to show that the reasons some give to undermine metaphysics do not apply to the discipline as I have characterized it. I consider the latter in order to refine this characterization and distinguish it from other more familiar or traditional views of the discipline. The result of this survey will be, I hope, a defended and clarified account of metaphysics whose distinctive problem will have become pressing.

A. Deflationary views of metaphysics

A true theory of metaphysics would provide some insight into what anything whatsoever is and inform every (true) claim about the world. Such a discipline is clearly ambitious. Many philosophers reject any claim of such a robust metaphysics as mere pretension or naïveté. Their motivation for doing so differs. Some maintain metaphysics is no discipline at all; others recognize it, but deny it any exceptional status, acknowledging metaphysics as merely one discipline among many or as playing only a subsidiary role to some other philosophical discipline or to properly “scientific” investigation.

1. Metaphysics as a hodgepodge

Thus, there are philosophers who, although they acknowledge a host of legitimate metaphysical projects, ones that seek general answers to questions about conspicuous things in or aspects of reality, deny that there is any one issue that underlies these projects. Consequently, there is insufficient unity among them for there to be a discipline of metaphysics *per se* (of course, one could stipulate any arbitrary list of projects to be “metaphysics”). Trenton Merricks, for one, denies there is any discipline.⁴ Karen Bennett recognizes metaphysics, but only as one discipline among many that contribute to philosophical inquiry.⁵ Both maintain metaphysical inquiry lacks unity and deny that it is crucial to inquiry itself.

Merricks regards metaphysics as inquiry into a mere hodgepodge of issues. After listing a number of claims pertaining to freedom, causation, determinism, truth, ontological categories, persistence, material objects, composition, truthmaking, modality and essence, he asserts: “It is...false that there is some...single unified topic that every one of these claims is about.”⁶ Yet there is no argument given for this claim; it is merely asserted. (Merricks seems to be relying on the ostensible heterogeneity of his examples to justify the claim.) Bennett likewise views metaphysics as lacking unity, as being a disjunctive enterprise, one part focused on the hodgepodge of traditional metaphysical issues of the sort that

⁴ See Merricks 2013.

⁵ See Bennett (forthcoming).

⁶ Merricks 2013: 722.

Merricks lists, the other part focused on “maintaining the toolbox”⁷, that is, determining what it is in the world that underlies “pervasive philosophical vocabulary”, the terms that express the notions that philosophers rely on in their investigations (of value, mind, language, knowledge, science, etc.). Bennett admits to being unable to see any way of unifying either the hodgepodge of traditional issues or her disjunctive account of metaphysics⁸. Thus, she shares Merricks’ view regarding the irremediable disunity of metaphysics.

Above, I characterize metaphysics as the discipline directed at an account of what the world is and what it comprises via the question of what a thing is. Such an account would be articulated in terms of the structure in reality: how things are related. In light of this, an obvious response to claims about the disunity of metaphysics is that there is a discipline here, one unified by being about how the world comprises things, that is, by being about the fundamental structure in reality. Both Merricks and Bennett, however, explicitly deny that metaphysics has such a focus.

Merricks asserts, again without argument, that the hodgepodge of metaphysical issues is “not all about the fundamental structure of reality.”⁹ Although he has a particular view of structure in mind¹⁰, it is clear that he intends the claim to apply to any notion of structure. Bennett gives three constraints on what metaphysics is, maintaining that each rules out that it is about fundamental reality.¹¹ Disregarding the arbitrariness of these constraints (she offers no justification for them), Bennett’s discussion indicates that she is presuming a certain notion of fundamentality, one on which to be fundamental is to be simple, to have no (material) proper parts. However, the notion of fundamentality is multifarious; it is widely

⁷ Bennett (forthcoming): §4.

⁸ In the antepenultimate paragraph of §4, Bennett (forthcoming).

⁹ Merricks 2013: 723.

¹⁰ He is critiquing here Theodore Sider’s position from Sider 2011.

¹¹ She holds that metaphysics must be distinguished from science and since a part of science, viz. physics, is about fundamental reality, metaphysics cannot also be. Moreover, she holds that metaphysics would still be a discipline even if there were no fundamental reality—if “some or all dependence chains fail to terminate in something fundamental”—and hence it cannot be just about fundamental reality, because there might not be such. Finally, she holds that metaphysics must account for what practicing metaphysicians do (as metaphysicians), and not all of what they do is concerned with fundamental reality. See Bennett (forthcoming): §4.

regarded as the correlate of the notion of ontological dependence: to be fundamental is to *not* be ontologically dependent. Insofar as there are many varieties of ontological dependence, there are many varieties of fundamentality. Which is the operative notion turns on what a thing is (as I argue in my “What is a Thing?”) and so is posterior to a theory of metaphysics as I characterize it. Thus, Bennett’s claim that metaphysics is not unified by being about how the world comprises things, that is, by being about the fundamental structure in reality is no more supported than Merricks’.

Upon examination, neither Bennett nor Merricks gives good reason to reject the ambitious discipline of metaphysics that I characterize. Indeed, by pursuing this discipline, an account of the fundamental structure in reality that unifies the metaphysical issues that Merricks lists, an account employing a different notion of fundamentality than the one Bennett presumes is revealed. Of course, this needs to be shown, but I do so elsewhere.¹²

2. Deflationary views that are based on substantive metaphysical assumptions

Merricks dismisses a unified discipline of metaphysics because he assumes that there is no account of fundamental structure that can unify traditional metaphysical issues. Bennett dismisses a unified discipline of metaphysics because she assumes a certain notion of fundamentality with which it seems inconsistent. Both, then, would reject the robust metaphysics I propose on the basis of undefended—and incorrect, as I argue—metaphysical assumptions, assumptions that can only be appropriately evaluated by pursuing metaphysics. Their positions merely underscore the need for a critical metaphysics. But Merricks and Bennett are by no means alone in rejecting robust metaphysics on the basis of assumptions that require robust metaphysics. There are many who have held deflationary views of metaphysics on the basis of assumptions that cannot be justified prior to the sort of ambitious discipline I characterize.

¹² Fiocco (unpublished).

Consider, then, the many philosophers who hold that inquiry into the world at large or things in themselves is misguided. The world itself, so they hold, is without structure—differentiated but amorphous—the things in it indeterminate. Consequently, the appropriate focus of inquiry, insofar as one is interested in the large-scale features of a structured reality, are the means conscious beings use to conceptualize and thereby organize the world. Thus, it is language or the classificatory capacities of mind that one should examine for insight into the world, and this endeavor is distinct from traditional metaphysics. Robust metaphysics, the ambitious discipline I have characterized, is idle because its objectives are chimerical and so its methods, whatever they might be, futile.

This position is closely associated with—indeed, usually rests on—epistemological views regarding the limited access that human persons have to the world. Its roots in modern philosophy are in Hume and it is developed through his work and, in different ways, in Kant's. The influence of these two philosophers has been hegemonic, if not definitive, in the analytic tradition. Through the Logical Positivists and the lingering dominance of Carnap and Quine, it remains potent in contemporary discussions of metaphysics.¹³ For present purposes, I need only observe that this position, in all its varieties, cannot really challenge a discipline whose purpose it is to investigate the world at large. This is because it makes substantive assumptions about what the world is—an unstructured array of whatnot—and how it can be known, and then prescribes a methodology for investigating apparently structured reality on the basis of these assumptions. Ironically, the dismissive position is deeply metaphysical, then; it takes for granted what I regard to be the primary objective of metaphysics, namely, an account of what the world is (with a corollary account of what a thing is).

As becomes clear in the sequel, I reject the account of the world (and the epistemologies) presumed by Hume, Kant and their contemporary heirs. I do not, however, merely adopt an incompatible view of reality in opposition to theirs. There are compelling reasons to reject a view of the world on which

¹³ See, for example, Chalmers 2009; Hofweber 2009; Thomasson 2009, 2007; Yablo 2009.

it is an unstructured array of whatnot. These reasons are revealed via the pursuit of metaphysics and by resolving its distinctive problem. Metaphysics, as I characterize it, is a discipline that provides the means of determining which of profoundly different views of the world in itself is correct. So, rather than showing that traditional metaphysics is idle, the position under consideration here makes pressing the need for pursuing it.

3. Naturalized metaphysics

One sees the same ironic move—rejecting robust metaphysics on presumptuously metaphysical grounds—from those who would “naturalize” metaphysics. Some of these naturalists deny that there is any discipline of metaphysics at all. They accept, of course, that there are questions that need to be answered regarding many of the same conspicuous things in reality that exercise the metaphysician, they just presume that these questions are to be answered by natural scientists, ultimately by physicists. Modern physics has no doubt been successful, by some measure, but to think it provides the means of answering every question about the world is mistaken.

There is, first of all, the question of what the world is. There is also the related question of what a thing is. One might have no interest in answering these questions, one might have no idea how to answer them, but there is no denying that they are legitimate questions. The physicist merely takes for granted their answers and, in so doing, apes the metaphysician: the world is a closed, law-governed system of causally related (or relatable) spatio-temporal entities; a thing just is something with causal capacities and a spatio-temporal location. But certainly one might wonder whether these answers are correct—perhaps the world is not a thing at all; perhaps “it” is not united as a system; perhaps there are no laws; perhaps there are things that are not in space or not in time. One might at least seek justification for them. However, if one does, none can be forthcoming from physics itself. That the world is a closed, law-governed system of causally related spatio-temporal entities—and the empiricist assumptions about how one can come to know about this system and these entities—are constitutive of the enterprise of

physics. These assumptions are the principles, the theoretical framework, of physics. Taken for granted, the constraints they impose, the empirical methodology they prescribe lead one to overlook, dismiss or deflate any phenomenon that might tell against them. To question the assumptions themselves—to go beyond physics in this way—is ipso facto to take up a different enterprise. Yet surely these assumptions can and should be examined critically.

The naturalist, therefore, takes for granted a circumscribed account of what the world is, how it is composed and what the things are that compose it, but does not have the means, qua naturalist (or physicist), to examine these (tendentious) basic ontological assumptions. The metaphysician does, though. Metaphysics is the discipline whose primary objective is an account of what the world is and what it comprises. Hence, the metaphysician does not begin with parochial assumptions; indeed, such assumptions are antithetical to this enterprise. To reject outright the questions that motivate metaphysics by presuming naturalistic (physicalistic) answers to them is just to be dogmatic. Insofar as one aspires to avoid dogma, one needs alternative means of answering these questions. Physics certainly has its place—as the discipline whose objective is a systematic account of the interactions of spatio-temporal entities—but there is more to inquiry than physics. Metaphysics is crucial.

Nonetheless, proponents of naturalized metaphysics criticize traditional metaphysics. It is worth considering some of their criticisms to see that they do not pertain to the discipline as I characterize it. Moreover, one finds in the positions of these naturalized metaphysicians—as the basis of their criticism—the sort of dogmatism described above; so one has here additional examples of philosophers rejecting robust metaphysics on the basis of assumptions that, were they to be justified, would require robust metaphysics.

Consider Ladyman, Ross, and Spurrett who are not only naturalistic, but avowedly scientific¹⁴, and defend a “radically naturalistic metaphysics” by which they mean a metaphysics “motivated

¹⁴ See the title of Chapter 1 of Ladyman and Ross 2007.

exclusively by attempts to unify hypotheses and theories that are taken seriously by contemporary science".¹⁵ They reject contemporary metaphysics, maintaining that it is directed at the "domestication"¹⁶ of science, that is, at making scientific discoveries "compatible with intuitive or 'folk' pictures of structural composition and causation"¹⁷ and that its purpose is to "reassure the metaphysician that what they already believe is true."¹⁸ Regardless of whether this is an accurate portrayal of contemporary metaphysics, I can concede to Ladyman, Ross and Spurrett that an activity with such purposes has no clear value. However, these purposes are obviously not those of the ambitious discipline of metaphysics that I characterize. This discipline is critical; domestication and reassurance have no roles to play in it. So there is here no challenge to that discipline.

Still, Ladyman, Ross, and Spurrett's "core complaint" concerning metaphysics is that since the fall of logical empiricism it "has proceeded without the proper regard for science"¹⁹. This criticism does apply to metaphysics as I characterize it, if the proper regard for science requires one to view it as prior to metaphysics. Ladyman, Ross and Spurrett maintain that any metaphysical account of reality must be constrained by one's best scientific theories, that "no other sort of metaphysics counts as inquiry into the objective nature of the world"²⁰. This is a very strong claim. Yet its basis is sheer dogma. Ladyman, Ross, and Spurrett merely assert that fundamental physics has "maximum scope", that there is nothing beyond fundamental physics to investigate.²¹ This is not so. As noted above, there are (at least) the crucial ontological questions of what the world is and what a thing is.

Of course, Ladyman, Ross, and Spurrett overlook these questions. At the outset of their discussion, they tacitly assume something like the familiar physicalist picture of the world. In the end,

¹⁵ Ladyman and Ross 2007: 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ladyman and Ross 2007: 12.

¹⁹ Ladyman and Ross 2007: 7.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See their Primacy of Physics Constraint on page 44.

though, they maintain that proper naturalism leads one to abandon “the image of the world as composed of little things, and indeed of the more basic intuition that there must be something of which the world is made.”²² At both points—hence, throughout their discussion—they simply take for granted some account of what the world is and what things are. In their naturalized metaphysics, Ladyman, Ross and Spurrett accept uncritically what only ambitious metaphysics can provide and these accounts, which are certainly unjustified, might very well be wrong. Ladyman, Ross and Spurrett are not unaware of this sort of criticism. Their response, though, is dismissive. They maintain that the “naturalist can argue that the metaphysical assumptions in questions are vindicated by the success of science, by contrast with the metaphysical assumptions on which [metaphysics that is not appropriately naturalized] is based which are not vindicated by the success of metaphysics since it can claim no such success.”²³ This is hardly an adequate response. Success depends on one’s objectives. The objective of the metaphysician is an account of what the world is and what it comprises. Such an objective is beyond the purview of physics and, indeed, prior to it (to the extent that the physicist and naturalist rely on some account of the world and of things in articulating their theories). The point remains that the basis of physical theory and naturalized metaphysics are blindly accepted ontological theses, unjustified and perhaps false.

Ladyman, Ross, and Spurrett would, presumably, remain unmoved by the foregoing considerations. They state: “it seems to us to be just ridiculous when philosophers look up from their desks and tell us that while sitting there concentrating they’ve discovered (usually all by themselves) facts about the nature of the world that compete with the fruits of ingenious experimentation conducted under competitive pressure and organized by complex institutional processes.”²⁴ What this rhetoric indicates, however, is not some problem with metaphysics, but its authors’ failure to recognize the scope—and

²² Ladyman and Ross 2007: 12.

²³ Ladyman and Ross 2007: 7.

²⁴ Ladyman and Ross 2007: 57.

ineluctability—of the ambitious discipline that I have characterized, and how it provides the ground rules for any investigation.

There are many stripes of naturalist. Their reservations about traditional metaphysics and their critiques of it differ, yet underlying each of these critiques is the same dogmatism that stultifies it when directed at the critical metaphysics I propose. Given the prevalence of naturalism and the dismissive attitude towards metaphysics it encourages, it is worth reinforcing this point by considering the position of another naturalist opponent of robust metaphysics.

Penelope Maddy urges exclusively naturalistic inquiry into the world. She is moved by “the fundamental naturalistic impulse: a resolute skepticism in the face of any ‘higher level’ of inquiry that purports to stand above the level of ordinary science. The naturalistic philosopher is a member of the scientific community; she regards the methods of science as her own....”²⁵ Thus, “Not on principle, but relentlessly in practice, her investigations are pursued on one level, as part and parcel of the single mosaic of natural science.”²⁶ Maddy develops this sort of naturalism via the character of the Second Philosopher, an inquirer “born native to our contemporary scientific world-view.”²⁷ She does not attempt to undermine directly traditional metaphysics, as do Ladyman, Ross and Spurrett; rather, she maintains there is simply nothing for the metaphysician to do.

Maddy bases her claims about the superfluousness of “higher level” robust metaphysics on the futility of certain attempts, by “proto-naturalists”, to extend the methods employed by natural scientists. Thus, Maddy considers, for example, the efforts of Hans Reichenbach and Rudolf Carnap in the first decades of the 20th century to respond to developments in physics that seemed incompatible with the views of Kant. Kant is central to Maddy’s discussion because she regards him as the paradigm of a

²⁵ Maddy 2001: 39.

²⁶ Maddy 2007: 47.

²⁷ Maddy 2007: 14.

philosopher who tries to expand naturalistic, empirical inquiry into an ideal, transcendental realm.²⁸ His objective in doing so is to obtain apriori insight into the structure of—the apparent necessary connections within—the world as experienced. Thus, Kant tries to go beyond, with an additional level of inquiry, the empiricism of Hume. Maddy is concerned that such transcendental inquiry differs markedly from appropriately naturalistic inquiry and that “it is not so clear what tools or methods or principles are involved, or what justifies them.”²⁹ As neo-Kantians, Reichenbach and Carnap try in different ways to preserve something of the Kantian account of necessary structure in reality; however, it is generally agreed, their efforts to do so are unsuccessful. It is these failures to extend empirical inquiry, to add a “supra-scientific” level, that Maddy takes as evidence that any attempt to do so is misguided.

I can concede every criticism that Maddy makes of Kant’s efforts, and those of his followers, to go beyond the sensible to discern the structure in reality. This is because to begin, as Maddy does, with the views of Kant (or Hume or indeed any philosopher) is contrary to the critical attitude that motivates the ambitious discipline of metaphysics I propose. Kant presumes an account of what the world is—unknowable in itself, knowable as structured by the cognitive capacities of a subject—yet the objective of metaphysics is precisely to provide an account of what the world is and what it comprises, that is, how it is structured. Maddy is sufficiently critical of Kant, his tools, methods, and principles, but wholly and uncritically accepting of a certain worldview: “[T]he naturalist begins her inquiry from a perspective inside our scientific practice, which is, in turn, an extension of common sense....From this perspective, she pursues a scientific study of science.”³⁰ Thus, she adopts with no consideration the theoretical framework of physics, and its accompanying accounts of what the world is, how it is composed and what the things are that compose it. Whereas her view, in the end, is a familiar one of material things causally interacting

²⁸ Maddy also develops (in the first three chapters of Maddy 2007) the views of the Second Philosopher by beginning with Descartes and considering the issue of radical skepticism. My concerns about Second Philosophy would be the same were they articulated via consideration of this epistemological thread of Maddy’s discussion.

²⁹ Maddy 2001: 38. Emphasis removed.

³⁰ Maddy 2001: 50.

in a law-governed system, as opposed to the world bereft of things endorsed by Ladyman, Ross, and Spurrett, underlying both views is the same empiricist, naturalistic dogma. So Maddy's Second Philosophy is no more of a challenge to a critical robust metaphysics than is Ladyman, Ross, and Spurrett's scientism.

Maddy asserts that if the metaphysician is "to remove the empirical blinders from the Second Philosopher's eyes, he must explain to her why extra-empirical investigation is needed, what purposes it will serve."³¹ But in light of the foregoing, the answer here should be obvious: a different sort of inquiry is needed to provide a justified account of what the world is and what it comprises—rather than one just taken on faith—an account that illuminates the fundamental structure in reality without presuming anything about this structure. Such inquiry provides the ground rules for any further investigation into anything whatsoever. The purposes of an ambitious discipline of metaphysics are, then, quite significant.

B. Metaphysics as autonomous

Though not complicated, this criticism of deflationary, naturalized metaphysics is profound. It should not be underappreciated because of its lack of complication. The scientist, the naturalist simply takes for granted ontological claims about what the world is and what a thing is (and, consequently, the means available to know about the world). If, however, one wants to take nothing for granted, and aspires to a justified and defensible account of what the world is (and what it comprises), one need take up a different enterprise. Empirical science has not the scope to provide what is being sought.

Hence, it is clear that robust metaphysics must have a different methodology than that of the empirical sciences. It must address the distinctive problem of metaphysics—thereby providing a critical account of what the world is and what it comprises, an overarching theory of reality that provides some insight into what anything whatsoever is—and so illuminate the things that are both the focus, e.g., the organisms, the molecules, the fundamental particles, and the means, e.g., the microscopes, the eyes, the brains, of empirical inquiry. In this way, metaphysics is prior to physics and so autonomous in the sense

³¹ Maddy 2007: 63.

employed in the work of George Bealer³²: it can be pursued “without relying substantively on the sciences”.³³ Metaphysics is autonomous yet continuous with science in that it provides the ground rules for any discipline that has a basis in the structure in reality. Still, the question remains of what the methodology of metaphysics is and how its distinctive problem is to be resolved.

1. Autonomy and apriority

There are many philosophers who are sympathetic to autonomous, robust metaphysics and would resist, presumably on similar grounds, the portrayals of metaphysics criticized above. Nevertheless, even those who object to attempts to deflate metaphysics adopt approaches that are themselves incompatible with the ambitious discipline I propose; they, too, make assumptions that, at least at the outset of inquiry, are inappropriately specific.

Thus, for example, a common assumption among those who take metaphysics seriously is that it must be an *apriori* discipline. It would certainly be surprising if it were; it does not seem possible to obtain an account of all of reality merely by reflecting on the means one uses to represent it, one’s concepts, or by any other method that eschews experience of reality. I believe, then, that the assumption that metaphysics is an *apriori* discipline is mistaken, not because I think it is an *aposteriori* discipline, but because the epistemological distinction between *apriori* and *aposteriori* is not applicable at the outset of inquiry, where appropriately critical ontological theorizing takes root. The very distinction presumes too much about the world and the cognitive capacities of human persons by assuming a substantive difference between perceiving the world with one’s senses and engaging it—in some way or other—by a different faculty. Critical metaphysics cannot be this presumptuous.

Bealer himself thinks that metaphysics is *apriori* because it is based on intuitions about the application of concepts. If metaphysics had its basis in concepts, the means one uses to represent the

³² See Bealer 1998, 1996. Bealer writes about “philosophy” in general, but it is clear his discussion also applies to metaphysics more specifically.

³³ Bealer 1998: 201.

world, the discipline would begin removed from its appropriate focus, the world itself. Were one to object that there is nothing to reality independently of one's concepts, that there is no structure, no knowable world independent of these, then one would be presuming quite a bit about the world (taking for granted some variety of Kantian position). Such presumptuousness is out of place at the outset of critical inquiry; it is illegitimate to include such assumptions about the structure in reality and one's epistemic access to the world in one's account of what metaphysics is. If this is what Bealer and other like-minded metaphysicians (such as Frank Jackson, David Chalmers, and Eli Hirsch³⁴) are doing, then their views collapse into those of philosophers, like the ones criticized above, who reject as chimerical the objective of traditional metaphysics to illuminate the world as it is in itself, independently of the activity of any conscious being.

Kit Fine, too, accepts that metaphysics is autonomous. He believes the source of this autonomy is the distinctive character of the concepts one employs when doing metaphysics, and claims that his position is very similar to Bealer's.³⁵ Nevertheless, the positions of these two metaphysicians seem to me quite different. Fine states that his conception of metaphysics is "broadly Aristotelian"³⁶—an approach that is not, in any obvious way, based on intuitions about the application of concepts—and, more explicitly, that "metaphysics is concerned, first and foremost, with the nature of reality".³⁷ This latter claim might sound consistent with the ambitious discipline I have characterized, but it is not. In making it, Fine just assumes that reality has a nature; in so doing, he takes for granted some account of what the world is, assuming, at least, that it is a thing with a nature. However, the purpose of metaphysics is to provide a justified account of what the world is (and thereby determine whether it is indeed a thing at all). Fine's substantive theoretical assumption is, then, inappropriate in the very statement of what the

³⁴ See Jackson 1998; Chalmers 2012, 2009; Hirsch 1986.

³⁵ Fine 2012: Footnote 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fine 2012: 8.

discipline is. Moreover, just as it is illegitimate to presume Kantian principles at the outset of metaphysical inquiry, it is no less so to presume Aristotelian ones. Metaphysics, as I characterize it, is the means to arbitrate among these incompatible philosophical traditions. As a discipline, it begins at a point prior to either and to any other tradition.

Despite these animadversions, I do agree with Fine that metaphysics is “not merely one form of enquiry among others but one that is capable of providing some kind of basis or underpinning for other forms of enquiry.”³⁸ Were Fine to articulate how metaphysics is able to do this, he would contribute to resolving the distinctive problem of metaphysics. Unfortunately, he does not. Even with the assumptions he makes, Fine never really answers his titular question (“what is metaphysics?”). Rather he asserts five main features of (his conception of) metaphysics that he maintains distinguish it from other forms of enquiry. These five features are “the apriority of its methods; the generality of its subject-matter; the transparency or ‘non-opacity’ of its concepts; its eidicity or concern with the nature of things; and its role as a foundation for what there is.”³⁹

No account of where these features come from, or what justifies their choice, is offered, so they are arbitrary in the same way that Bennett’s constraints on metaphysics are.⁴⁰ Each of Fine’s features requires extensive comment and clarification. Comment and clarification that cannot be provided without many further assumptions about the world, what a thing is, and one’s cognitive engagement with the world and things. However, the objective of metaphysics is a critical account of what the world is and what it comprises, an overarching theory of reality that provides some insight into what anything whatsoever is again. So, again, such substantive features and the corollary assumptions needed to illuminate them are out of place at the outset of metaphysical inquiry. Although Fine appreciates the importance of metaphysics, and its autonomy, he is as presumptuous as any dismissive naturalist in his

³⁸ Fine 2012: 9.

³⁹ Fine 2012: 8.

⁴⁰ See §III.A.1. above.

approach to the discipline. Consequently, his approach sheds no light on an appropriate methodology for robust metaphysics, one capable of resolving its distinctive problem.

Timothy Williamson has given much consideration to methodology in philosophy. Williamson is no “crude empiricist”.⁴¹ He maintains that there is scientific enquiry that is not entirely empirical and, thus, there are “armchair sciences”, mathematics for one, adding: “If mathematics is an armchair science, why not philosophy too?”⁴² So, like Bealer and Fine, he recognizes the importance of peculiarly philosophical inquiry. Still, if philosophy in general and so, presumably, metaphysics in particular, has an “armchair” methodology, Williamson does not think metaphysics is an apriori discipline. On this he and I agree (though whereas Williamson maintains that the apriori/aposteriori distinction is “too crude”⁴³ in the context of a basic investigation of philosophical methodology, I believe it is too loaded).

Williamson and I also agree that metaphysics is not primarily linguistic nor conceptual, not about intuitions (rather than their objects), nor about reflective equilibrium. Rather its goal is “to discover what fundamental kinds of things there are and what properties and relations they have, not to study the structure of our thought about them.”⁴⁴ It is, however, precisely because it has this goal and, thus, there is no “special domain for philosophical investigation”⁴⁵ that metaphysics has its distinctive problem. The generality of its subject matter requires that the discipline provide some insight into what anything whatsoever is, and so there are no means beyond metaphysics by which to evaluate this insight—yet, as a critical enterprise, it requires evaluation.

The resolution of this distinctive problem requires a distinctive methodology. But Williamson maintains that there is nothing exceptional about metaphysical inquiry. Such inquiry is really just non-philosophical inquiry: “much past and present philosophy consists in just the unusually systematic and

⁴¹ Williamson 2007: 2.

⁴² Williamson 2007: 4.

⁴³ Williamson 2007: 169. See, as well, page 3.

⁴⁴ Williamson 2007: 19.

⁴⁵ Williamson 2007: 5.

unrelenting application of ways of thinking required over a vast range of non-philosophical inquiry. The philosophical applications inherit a moderate degree of reliability from the more general cognitive patterns they instantiate.”⁴⁶ If this were so, and if metaphysics were continued to be pursued in this way, then the discipline would be fruitless. It seems Williamson fails to recognize the particular difficulties in robust, critical metaphysics and, hence, in discerning the ground rules for any investigation. By attending to these difficulties and employing a methodology that addresses them, one *can* do better.⁴⁷

2. Metaphysics as first philosophy

If robust metaphysics is unified, not naturalistic (in a rigidly empiricist sense), autonomous yet not apriori; if this critical discipline is prior to others, providing a basis for empirical science and inquiry more generally, then all this suggests a quite traditional, Aristotelian view of the discipline: metaphysics as *first philosophy*. It is hard to say exactly what the subject matter of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is and, thus, what first philosophy is supposed to be, but at some points Aristotle characterizes it as the study of *being qua being*. This assumes that something or other exists, has being, and that the being of such can be studied. Both of these claims are eminently plausible. So this approach seems conducive to the objective of the ambitious discipline of metaphysics as I characterize it: a comprehensive general account of what the world is (and what it comprises) pursued via the question of what a thing, a being is. However, whatever Aristotle took first philosophy to be, it was not this. He explicitly argues that being is not a genus, that there is no class that includes all things as things, and, hence, that there is no insightful answer to the question of what a thing—in the most general sense—is.⁴⁸ Given the clear affinities between first philosophy and the ambitious discipline of metaphysics I characterize, it is nonetheless worthwhile to consider the views of some metaphysicians working in an Aristotelian mode to see how these views

⁴⁶ Williamson 2007: 3.

⁴⁷ Here I allude to the Afterword of Williamson 2007.

⁴⁸ I recur to this crucial point in Fiocco (unpublished).

compare to those criticized above and whether they can contribute to resolving the distinctive problem of metaphysics.

No recent philosopher has done more to promote traditional metaphysics—metaphysics as a sort of first philosophy—than E.J. Lowe. His expansive body of work is rich, profound and important and his *The Possibility of Metaphysics* was, I believe, largely successful in achieving its objective of making robust metaphysics a central part of contemporary philosophy.⁴⁹ Throughout his work, Lowe develops a neo-Aristotelian ontology (one based on the Aristotle of the *Categories* and inimical to hylomorphism), taking metaphysics as “‘first philosophy’, a discipline that is conceptually and epistemologically prior to any of the empirical sciences and an intellectual prerequisite of their pursuit of truth concerning the natural world and the human mind.”⁵⁰ This is an ambitious discipline; as foundational and directed at the world, it avoids many of the criticisms of alternative approaches to metaphysics I broach above. Nevertheless, Lowe’s approach is open to the most significant of these criticisms: first philosophy as practiced by him is not sufficiently critical.⁵¹

Lowe assumes, pace Aristotle, that being is a genus and, thus, that there is an absolutely general class of entities (i.e., existents, beings, things)⁵², yet Lowe provides no account of what a thing is. Without such an account, the ontological basis of one’s metaphysics is obscure and, worse, wholly unjustified. Furthermore, one has not the means to determine whether the world is a thing. If the primary objective of metaphysics is an account of what the world is, one cannot meet this objective with a theory that provides no insight into what a thing is. Lowe takes for granted some unarticulated and, hence, undefended notion of a thing. Indeed, Lowe’s metaphysical framework includes four categories of thing. Although Lowe is quite clear about the distinctions among these categories, he provides no account of

⁴⁹ See Lowe 1998: 1 and the preface to the book.

⁵⁰ Lowe 2013b: 196.

⁵¹ Moreover, Lowe takes metaphysics to be an apriori discipline. See Lowe 2014.

⁵² Lowe 2006: 7-8, 39.

whence they are derived or why one should accept them. Of course, they come from Aristotle (though Aristotle presumed several more), but locating this historical source is not satisfactory from a critical perspective. Nor are the copious demonstrations of the theoretical utility of a four-category ontology provided in Lowe's many papers and books: usefulness is not necessarily an indication of what is so.

Working in the same vein, Tuomas Tahko defends a view of metaphysics as first philosophy. He argues that metaphysics is not about what is, as Quine and his followers believe, but about how these things are.⁵³ This leads to his view, similar in many respects to Lowe's, that metaphysics is the science of essence.⁵⁴ Suppose then that first philosophy is indeed, as Lowe and Tahko would have it, the science of essence. The first question this raises is what an essence is. However, one cannot answer this question (or argue that an essence is not a thing, as Lowe does⁵⁵) without an account of what a thing is. Although Tahko provides a theoretical account of essence⁵⁶, this account is articulated within a framework of Aristotelian priority and forms. Such an account, like Lowe's four-category ontology, just raises the question of whether—and why—such a framework should be adopted in the first place.

Ultimately, an Aristotelian approach to metaphysics and to inquiry more generally might be insightful, but the metaphysician who takes for granted the framework of such an approach is no different—and so no less objectionable—than the strident naturalist who just takes for granted the “modern scientific worldview”. The uncritical adoption of Aristotelian principles, distinctions and apparatus is precisely what gave rise to the (eventual) uncritical adoption of the world as a closed, law-governed system of causally related spatio-temporal entities. What is needed is a steadfastly critical discipline that does not presume some worldview, but rather is directed at providing an account of what

⁵³ Tahko 2012: 30.

⁵⁴ See Tahko 2013. For a significant difference between Tahko's and Lowe's positions, see page 58.

⁵⁵ Lowe 2013a; 2008.

⁵⁶ Tahko 2013: 54, 55.

the world is in the first place; a discipline that adopts no tendentious principle. This is precisely what robust metaphysics, as I characterize it, is.

§IV. Conclusion: Metaphysics and the Need for a Novel Methodology

The ambitious discipline of metaphysics that I characterize is one directed at an account of what the world is and what it comprises via the question of what a thing is. This is a critical discipline and so it is directed at understanding rather than merely at truth. Insofar as it is a form of critical inquiry, metaphysics is incompatible with dogma, which in this context is any ontological claim not adequately defended. The purpose of the foregoing survey of contemporary metaphysical inquiry is twofold: to determine whether there is any reason, in light of the views of critics of robust metaphysics, to reject the ambitious discipline I characterize, and to bring the distinctive features of this characterization into sharper focus by considering the views of others who recognize the central importance of metaphysics.

The survey shows that the discipline I propose is neither undermined by the critics of robust metaphysics nor replaceable by any of the positions of its proponents. Its place is secure because both critics and proponents alike are inappropriately dogmatic in their positions. Echt metaphysics can literally take no thing for granted. As the foundation for all inquiry, every principle must be justified or, at least, defended by some means. This, however, leads directly to the distinctive problem of metaphysics, which in light of the foregoing, should now seem urgent. All inquiry depends on metaphysics, yet metaphysics has a daunting problem. This problem, again, is that the objective of metaphysics is an entirely critical account of what the world is, an overarching theory of reality that provides some insight into what anything whatsoever is, but given the scope of this account, there are no means independent of it by which to evaluate it—yet as critical and directed at understanding, the theory requires some evaluation.

If metaphysics is to be realized at all, let alone be fruitful, this problem must be resolved. Doing so requires a singular methodology, one not taken up in any of the approaches to metaphysics considered

above. This methodology must begin with a theoretical framework that is general—excluding nothing—and exceedingly plausible—uncontroversial yet not vacuous—because these principles must pertain to everything and be amenable to the strictest criticism. They must be evaluable by means that are not disengaged from the world, lest the resulting metaphysics be cut off from what it is intended to illuminate. In fact, assessment can come only via confrontation with the world, for there cannot be presumed to be other than the world at the outset of inquiry. Therefore, the justification for the theoretical framework of robust metaphysics cannot come from further theory—there is none of the appropriate standing to which to take recourse—rather it comes from the world. For this to be the case, however, the principles must be situated (*vis-à-vis* the world) within a certain context, one in which no assumption is made about anything. Appreciating their content and their truth within this unique context is the key to metaphysical inquiry. I take up the project prescribed here in other work.^{57, 58}

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⁵⁸ I would like to thank John Heil for comments on a draft of this paper.

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