

The Question of Metaphysics

Jessica Wilson finds an answer

Metaphysics is under perennial pressure to justify its existence. It's natural to ask: why do we need metaphysics in addition to science, math, and other well-heeled disciplines, which appear to target the same subject matter? What does the metaphysics of mind bring to the table that psychology, psychiatry, and neurology haven't already put there? Don't the chemical and material sciences already provide the full story about how some objects can compose another? Hasn't mathematics, in establishing that there are prime numbers, thereby established that there are numbers? And so on. In answer to this sort of redundancy concern, metaphysicians might maintain that they are in the business of offering distinctively metaphysical explanations of this or that phenomenon; but here again it is natural to ask, with such unfamiliar metaphysical notions as essence, universals, possible worlds, "naturalness", and the like in mind: why think that metaphysical explanations are intelligible, much less illuminating? The broader question, then – call it "the question of metaphysics" – is whether there is any role for metaphysics to play on which it is both non-redundant and capable of genuinely illuminating whatever subject matter is at issue.

Non-philosophers – recently, Stephen Hawking, Bill Nye, and Neil DeGrasse Tyson – regularly endorse a negative answer to the question of metaphysics (or of philosophy

– non-experts don't always distinguish the two). Metaphysicians are rightly dismissive of negative assessments coming from those who, like Hawking, Nye, and Tyson, aren't reliable guides to the content or practice of metaphysics, much less of its value. But metaphysics is also the regular target of philosophical attack, especially by contemporary neo-Carnapians (including David Chalmers, Eli Hirsch, and Amie Thomasson) who while rejecting various aspects of Rudolf Carnap's empiricism are inclined to think he was right that metaphysics is, at face value, multiply problematic, and as such must be reconceived in some or other deflationary terms.

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In my view, philosophical critiques of metaphysics do not succeed. My aim here, however, is not to rehearse these critiques or my preferred responses to them. Instead I'll aim to approach the question of metaphysics head-on, in three steps. First, I want to make a case that metaphysical methodology itself obliges metaphysicians to take the concerns about the redundancy and explanatory intelligibility of

metaphysics seriously. Second, I want to argue that the currently popular “hands-off” conception of metaphysical theorising is unable to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of metaphysics. Third, I want to put my preferred “embedded” conception of metaphysics on the table, and say why it makes good sense of metaphysics as a non-redundant discipline, capable of producing intelligible and illuminating results.

It seems to me that metaphysicians must take seriously the concerns about the redundancy and intelligibility of metaphysics – ironically enough, as a case in point of metaphysical methodology. After all, the first rule of metaphysical theorising is Ockham’s razor: don’t posit entities – or theories, or practices, or any other goings-on – beyond necessity. It’s also a core principle of metaphysical theorising that theories should aim to satisfy certain desiderata, including being explanatory, intelligible, fruitful, and so on. When the methodology of metaphysics is applied to metaphysics itself, does it survive Ockham’s razor? Moreover, does it do so in a way that suggests that the results of metaphysical theorising are capable of *illuminating* the target phenomena? Metaphysicians are duty-bound to (try to) answer the question of metaphysics – not because others have asked it, but as a case-in-point of the operative standards of metaphysical theorising.

Now, to move forward on this question we need first to get clear on what conception of metaphysics is supposed to be at issue. An underappreciated point in discussions about the value of metaphysics is that, even restricting our focus to the broadly Anglophone analytic tradition (as I will do in what follows, since I am most familiar with this tradition), there is no uniform consensus among practitioners

either about what metaphysics is or how it should be done. Even so, it is possible to identify, in contemporary metaphysical practice and theorising, certain operative conceptions of metaphysics that are individual enough to allow for a reasonable assessment of whether they have the resources for defending metaphysics as a non-redundant and intelligible discipline. Here I’ll focus on two, or maybe two-and-a-half.

The first approach is what I call the “hands-off” conception of metaphysics. On this approach, metaphysics should not meddle in other disciplines, or indeed, in what we ordinarily believe. Hence in *Parts of Classes* Lewis says, in considering whether we might reject set-theoretic classes on philosophical grounds, “That will not do. Mathematics is an established, going concern. Philosophy is as shaky as can be. To reject mathematics for philosophical reasons would be absurd.” In “On What Grounds What”, Jonathan Schaffer concurs, saying of the claim that there are prime numbers, “[this claim] is a mathematical truism. It commands Moorean certainty, as being more credible than any philosopher’s argument to the contrary. Any metaphysician who would deny it has ipso facto produced a reductio for her premises.” And in “The Question of Realism”, Kit Fine says, more generally, that “in this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe.”

One problem with this approach to metaphysics is that it fails to make sense of the fact that the results of metaphysical investigations frequently inform science, math, logic, language, and ordinary belief. But the real prob-

lem is that it doesn't ensure that metaphysics has a non-redundant role to play. To start, some arguments that metaphysics is redundant (notably, that due to Thomas Hofweber) appeal to something like a hands-off view by way of motivation, with the suggestion being that metaphysical disputes are trivially resolved by attention to the relevant science or discipline. As such, the hands-off view invites rather than resolves the redundancy concern.

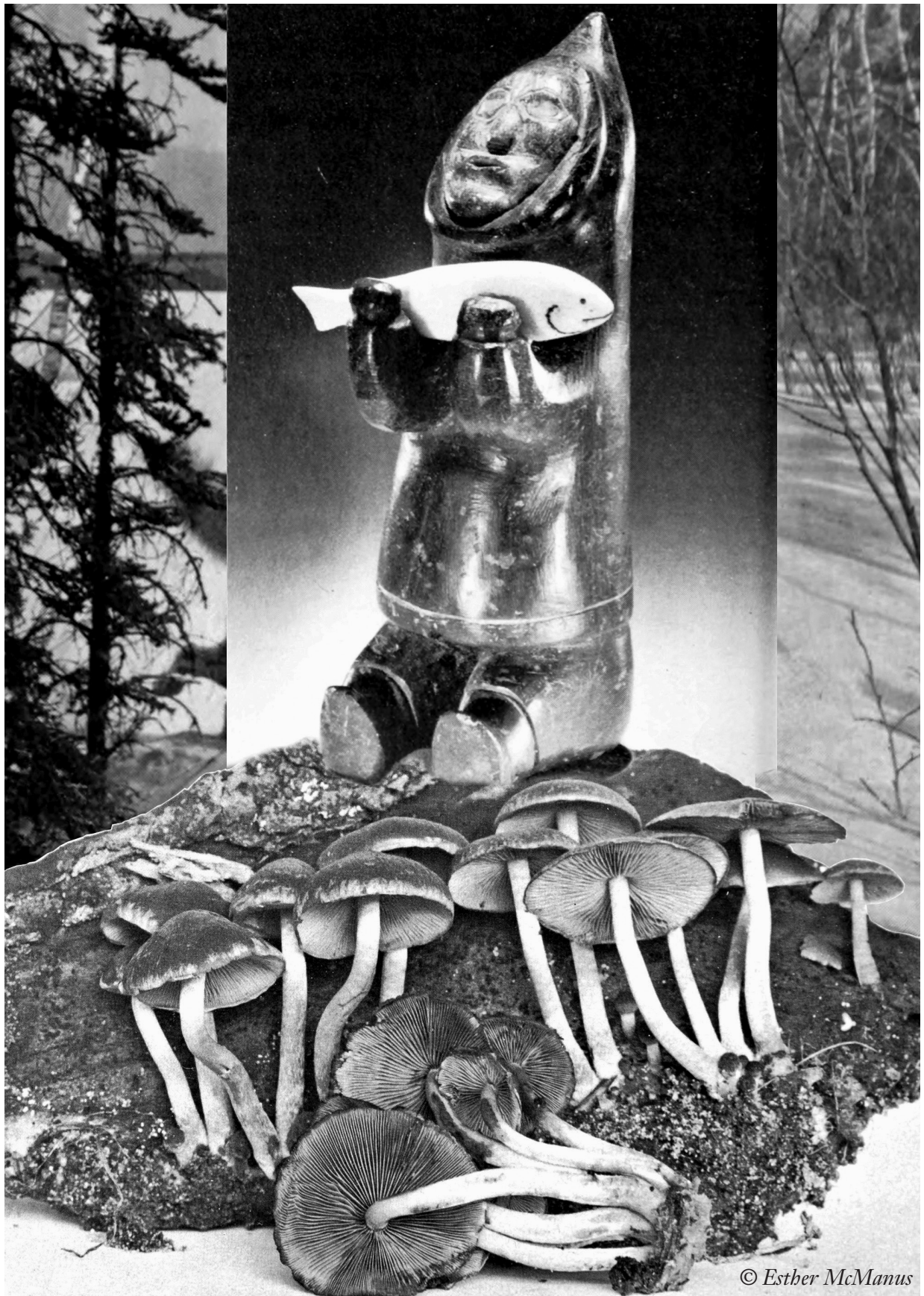
The hands-off metaphysician might respond that this is too quick: even if metaphysics should not interfere with non-philosophical claims about the existence and features of a given subject matter, there is still a role for it to play in elucidating the deeper structure of reality – that is, in determining what is fundamental or real, and how the non-fundamental or merely apparent depends on what is fundamental or real. Fine has suggested that the proper business of metaphysics is to determine what is “Real” (or really real, as the case may be). Schaffer similarly claims that while “contemporary existence debates are trivial, in that the entities in question obviously do exist”, “[w]hat is not trivial is whether they are fundamental.” On such an understanding of the hands-off view, might metaphysics have a non-redundant role to play?

It seems to me that the answer is no. To start, many non-philosophical disciplines encode presuppositions about, or make explicit claims about, what is fundamental or real. Mathematical concern with fundamentality and dependence is reflected in debate over how best to axiomatize a given theory, in continuing investigations into the reducibility of mathematical objects or claims to others, and in the existence of fields such as category theory, which aim to provide foundational bases

for all mathematical elements of a certain type. The great majority of contemporary scientists take as a basic presupposition that physical goings-on – entities, features, laws and associated interactions – are fundamental *vis-a-vis* all other broadly scientific goings-on. And many non-philosophical disciplines, ranging from physics to psychology, are reasonably seen as being in the business of distinguishing appearance from reality (as per Arthur Eddington's discussion of physics as distinguishing the real from the manifest nature of objects, and Freudian and Jungian explanations of the underlying motivations for behaviour). The redundancy concern crops up again for claims about fundamentality, dependence, and reality, so it remains that the hands-off view invites rather than resolves this concern.

A positive answer to the question of metaphysics also requires establishing that metaphysical results are capable of being intelligible and illuminating. And here, too, the hands-off view faces difficulties, at least when implemented by those, like Fine and Schaffer, who aim to elucidate the structure of reality by appeal to a primitive notion or relation of metaphysical dependence, introduced by pointing to certain examples, including the dependence of conjunctions on conjuncts, the dependence of mental states on physical states (if physicalism is correct), and so on. They call this primitive notion or relation “ground” or “grounding”; I call it (big-“G”) “Grounding” to flag that this is a new posit, and not just a schematic reference to one or another specific metaphysical dependence relations.

But as I've argued elsewhere, Grounding faces a number of difficulties from an explanatory point of view. To start, as a thinly described primitive, Grounding is incapable in



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itself of shedding any illuminating light on cases of metaphysical dependence. Its proponents attempt to beef up their primitive with certain formal features (standardly: irreflexivity, asymmetry, transitivity, and hyperintensionality). But these features fail to distinguish Grounding from the sort of relations (like strong emergence) that are supposed to contrast with metaphysical dependence. Plus, they problematically rule out paradigmatic cases of dependence (for example, the identity-based dependence of the mental on the physical, on a reductive physicalist view).

Moreover, and again reflecting Grounding's overly abstract nature, a Grounding claim or associated fact (for example, that the physical Grounds the mental) immediately introduces a new question: what Grounds the supposed Grounding claim or fact (for example, what Grounds the fact that the physical Grounds the mental)? Indeed, Grounding claims introduce a regress of such questions. Hence Grounding not only fails to provide any explanation going beyond primitive stipulation of the dependence at issue, its holding moreover introduces new (perhaps infinitely many) explanatory gaps. Given this and the previous points, it's perhaps no surprise that most of the considerable recent literature on Grounding has consisted either in offering specific cases of dependence as counterexamples to one or other stipulated feature of Grounding, or in providing one or other answer to the vexed question, "What Grounds Grounding?" Suffice to say that if we are looking for evidence that metaphysics can result in intelligible and illuminating explanations, we will not find it here.

I turn now to my preferred conception of metaphysics, which I call the "embedded" con-

ception. Here metaphysics is embedded in two ways. First, metaphysics is embedded in other disciplines – it is firmly "in the loop" with any and all other areas of investigation relevant to the subject matter in question, with the directions of potential influence going both to and from metaphysics. Second, metaphysical notions and posits are embedded in the notions and posits of other areas of investigation; though typically somewhat more abstract, the components of metaphysical accounts grow from, rather than float free of, more familiar notions. In what follows I'll expand a bit on these features of the embedded conception, and say why they provide support for taking metaphysics to be both non-redundant and capable of being genuinely explanatory.

Might metaphysics have a non-redundant role to play?

First, regarding the embedding of metaphysics in other disciplines: I reject any suggestion that metaphysical disputes are trivially resolved by attention to non-philosophical areas of investigation. Even aside from the clear possibility of empirical disconfirmation, intellectual history makes clear that that we cannot always take ordinary or theoretical claims at face value. There may be hidden inconsistencies (as with, for example, understandings of set theory as containing a naive comprehension axiom), or claims from different domains may conflict (as with, for example, ordinary and scientific understandings of solidity). In such cases of internal and external conflict – cases which, indeed, characteristically drive metaphysical

debate – we cannot assume that the associated posits or claims are trivially acceptable.

On the contrary, one non-redundant and time-worn role for metaphysics is as assessing whether the claims of other disciplines are in good order when considered against various theoretical desiderata, including not just internal and external consistency but a range of other methodological considerations. Moreover, in the absence of an oracle to do this work, the most systematic way for the metaphysician to proceed in assessing non-philosophical claims (be they about numbers, properties, genders, or what have you) is for them to construct a “meta-account” – a metaphysical account – of the subject matter, which efficiently weighs in on the claims at issue and which is informed, to the extent possible, by all the relevant data and theoretical considerations. Here, then, we have two related non-redundant roles for metaphysics: first, as a meta-discipline, whose job involves assessing and systematising claims of other disciplines; second, as constructing meta-accounts of a given subject matter, as needed to conduct these meta-disciplinary investigations. In contrast to the hands-off conception, the embedded conception takes the primary jobs of metaphysics to be figuring out what we – all of us, not just philosophers – have reason, all things considered, to believe.

Importantly, if we let metaphysics play this meta-disciplinary role, we do not thereby risk drastic consequences such as “rejecting mathematics” (as Lewis put it). Suppose that metaphysical investigation were to indicate that numbers don’t exist, and that we do not want to see this result as undermining the truth of mathematical claims. Rather than maintaining that metaphysics is irrelevant to mathematics, we could take the metaphysical result as ev-

idence that the mathematical claims at issue are true in virtue of facts – plausibly, cardinality and associated relational facts – which are neutral on the existence of numbers. Moreover, in other cases – say, involving how gender, race, or free will are understood in certain social or legal institutions – we might well want metaphysical results to have determinative extra-philosophical impact, and the embedded conception makes room for this.

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Second, regarding the embedding of metaphysical notions and posits in those of other disciplines: there are positive and negative reasons for doing so. The negative motivation is that we have reason to eschew the sort of overly abstract theoretical posit represented by primitive Grounding (along with other questionable metaphysical posits, including primitivist understandings of naturalness, indeterminacy, structure, quantification, reference, and so on), because such posits fail to genuinely illuminate the target subject matter, and indeed, introduce more confusion than they remove. And the positive motivation is that, by way of contrast, metaphysical accounts which are intelligibly connected to first-order investigations into a given subject matter are capable of providing genuine illumination into this subject matter.

The case of metaphysical dependence is an illustrative case in point. Since the 1970’s,

metaphysicians of mind and science have identified a large number of specific metaphysical relations as potentially suitable for characterising the dependence of, e.g., mental on physical states, or biological on chemical states, in terms compatible with non-reductive versions of physicalism. Among the specific relations on offer are functional realisation, the part-whole relation, mechanistic or causal varieties of composition, the determinable-determinate relation, the proper subset relation between token powers, and a relation involving an elimination in degrees of freedom. Each of these relations, when understood as holding against the backdrop assumption that the physical goings-on are (relatively) fundamental, serves to provide an intelligible and explanatory account of how some seemingly higher-level goings-on (mental states, say) might completely metaphysically depend on lower-level physical goings-on, without being identical with those goings-on. And each of these relations is sufficiently familiar and contentful that debates over the features, consequences, and applications of the relations to specific cases can fruitfully proceed. In particular, it is worth noting that none of these relations has invited questions analogous to the “What Grounds Grounding?” occupying so much of the Grounding literature.

The explanatory virtues of these accounts of dependence follow, I submit, from the fact that each of the specific relations to which they appeal are familiar from or clearly operative in first-order investigations or experience, though appropriately articulated, regimented and otherwise run through the metaphysician’s mill. As such, the accounts conform to and illustrate the fruitful application of the second commitment of the embedded con-

ception – namely, to characterise the target subject matter in terms that grow from, rather than float free of, those of other disciplines.

We are in position to sum up. What answer is to be given to the question of metaphysics depends on the conception of metaphysics at issue. Neither “hands-off” nor overly primitivist approaches have the resources to establish metaphysics as non-redundant and genuinely explanatory. On the *embedded* conception, however, metaphysics has non-redundant jobs to do in assessing and systematising other disciplines, and in constructing meta-accounts, as part of this assessment, which are sensitive to the full range of data and theoretical desiderata. And on the embedded conception, metaphysics is capable of illuminating its target subject matter, with existing investigations into specific relations of metaphysical dependence illustrating the explanatory value of metaphysical accounts whose terms are intelligibly connected to those in related areas of study and experience. I conclude that the question of metaphysics has a positive answer, when metaphysics proceeds via *interaction* rather than *isolation*.

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