# **A Metametaphysics of Form**

*Abstract* (180)

A model of metaphysics associated with EJ Lowe and Tuomas Tahko sees metaphysics as involving *a priori* knowledge of possible essences, or at least modal facts, and delimiting the actual ‘ontological categories,’ the ultimate and essential divisions of what it is to exist, based on the results of *a posteriori* scientific investigation. Their approach to metaphysics has been criticized by those who argue that such metaphysics is unsuitably *a priori*, disconnected with empirical research in natural science, and ends up failing to provide meaningful constraints on metaphysical theorization. I present different epistemological and semantic worries about these accounts to motivate an alternative account on which metaphysics centers on form, rather than possibility. This scholastic account is shown to incorporate the skeptical insights as constitutive of its approach to existence, by way of the position that ‘being’ is not a genus. Rather, ‘being’ is a determinable. The scholastic approach can thus provide responses to the skeptics, since it denies that ontological categories – in the Lowe/Tahko sense – are what metaphysicians investigate and proposes a different account of them as classes of forms.

Meta-metaphysical reflection is nothing new. *Avant la lettre,* Aristotle’s attempt to lay out a science of ‘being *qua* being’ and its first principles – the scientific discipline that came to be called ‘metaphysics’ – involved an attempt to justify his methodology as well as to develop responses to skeptics. Contemporary meta-metaphysics has revived some of these discussions. Whereas all metaphysicians roughly agree on the sorts of problems that count as ‘metaphysics,’ and generically that the subject matter concerns the nature and structure of reality, not all metaphysicians agree about what constitutes the form of an answer to such problems. Some contemporary metaphysicians focus on existence questions – listing *what exists* – whereas others focus on ‘grounding’ or dependence relations of some kind – what *depends on* whator is *fundamental.* These differences tend to appear in responses to skeptical challenges to metaphysics.

Skeptical challenges can give principled reasons to prefer one such approach to metaphysics as opposed to another. Jonathan Schaffer, for example, argues that the triviality of responses to existence questions gives us reason to accept a conception of metaphysical reflection as aiming to provide accounts of the grounding or dependence relations that undergird what is fundamental. It is not difficult to see that there areor existnumbers between 5 and 10 and, thus, that *there are numbers*. What is difficult is saying whether numbers are fundamental entities, e.g., grounded in some extra-mental structure of reality, or merely conventional.[[1]](#footnote-2)

In this paper, I will begin by arguing that approaches to metaphysics which center on modal intuitions open themselves up to unnecessary skeptical challenges. EJ Lowe and Tuomas Tahko are exemplars by which I will illustrate this problem. Lowe and Tahko take a core element of metaphysics to rest upon knowledge of possible essences, which allows us to reflect upon possible beings and their kinds. While skepticism about modal knowledge might be a kind of global skepticism, these claims about metaphysics resting on modal knowledge are dialectically ineffective with scientific anti-realists of various stripes, and skeptics might justifiably appeal to such anti-realism to question whether claims about modality constitute knowledge or are a substantive kind of knowledge.

Modal intuitions are not as necessary for metaphysics as Lowe, Tahko, and skeptical interlocutors believe. Metaphysics can be much more ably defended against skeptical challenges if it rests simply on knowledge of what is actual, not what is possible. ‘Putting actuality first’ is a motto that aptly describes the scholastic metametaphysics which I will then propose, showing that it avoids the accusations of non-naturalism as well as the skeptical challenges, as scholastics build their house not on modal facts but on *form*. In fact, I will propose that the cornerstone of scholastic metametaphysics is the core insight behind Rudolf Carnap’s well-known skepticism about metaphysics.

1. A Defense of the Possibility of Metaphysics

There are well-known criticisms that metaphysics is an impossible enterprise. Recently, Bas van Fraassen has criticized analytic metaphysicsas involving problematic methodology that overly relies on *a priori* intuitions, where these intuitions apply not to reality but only to their own logical constructions (or ‘postulations’). Metaphysicians therefore are involved not in a scientific study of entities that exist in the real world, but in the “development of a detailed, intricate understanding of simulacra under the same names” as those entities.[[2]](#footnote-3) While many have disputed whether and to what extent metaphysics involves *a priori* knowledge or intuitions, the key point of van Fraassen’s criticisms largely rest on epistemological considerations (which he defends as part of his attack on forms of scientific realism): we should withhold belief in anything going “beyond the actual, observable phenomena, and [so] to recognize no objective modality in nature.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Specifically, then, van Fraassen argues that one cannot have objective knowledge of modal truths; instead, what we can know are objective, non-modal facts about what is observable.[[4]](#footnote-5) Van Fraassen’s objections to metaphysics are thus largely *epistemological*. They thus bear some resemblance to views popularly attributed to Kant (leaving aside scholarly questions whether this accurately represents Kantianism) that knowledge of what things are like ‘in themselves’ – in this case, knowledge of essential differences, necessities, or possibilities – is impossible or unnecessary.

Several metaphysicians agree with van Fraassen that analytic metaphysics rests on objective claims about modal knowledge. EJ Lowe and Tuomas Tahko and defend the possibility of metaphysics precisely on modal grounds. In short, they each argue that modal knowledge makes metaphysics possible but also necessary. As EJ Lowe puts it, “experience alone cannot determine what is actual, in the absence of a metaphysical delimitation of the possible.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Those who hold that scientific knowledge can do without metaphysics, Lowe argues, fail to notice that “empirical science is dependent upon metaphysics,” because science involves “assumptions which go beyond anything that science itself can legitimate.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Lowe means that science alone, independent of metaphysical assumptions, cannot reveal facts about what is possibly the case, and so cannot determine what kinds of things are actual either. For Lowe, making any existence claims about the world requires modal knowledge of what is possible. Metaphysics aims to clarify our modal knowledge, and this clarification or reflection upon modal knowledge is not accomplished by any other discipline.

Lowe seems to reason thus: To judge that anything is actual, we must know facts about what is possible from which to delimit them. Facts about possibility are not derived from experience but are *a priori*. Hence, we must know *a priori* facts in order to judge that anything is actual. What is known as *a priori* is only known in a confused way; employing *a priori* intuitions without clarification will result in misjudging what is actual. For that reason, clarifying *a priori* intuitions is necessary to avoid misjudging what is actual. Since we cannot know what is actual without knowing facts about modality, clarity about those facts is a prerequisite for making judgements about anything else. Metaphysics provides that clarity.

To be clear, Lowe understands metaphysics to have as its subject not modality itself, but clarifying modal intuitions as they pertain to *existence*. Metaphysicians are concerned not with the compossibility of a set of propositions (i.e., not entailing a contradiction), but with whether a state of affairs of a given type can obtain or certain entities possibly exist.[[7]](#footnote-8) That is to say that the goal of metaphysics is to list the kinds of entities that exist and justify this list of ‘ontological categories.’ Since these kinds of categories concern what kinds of things possibly be actual, simply speaking, these categories need to be both [1] *essential* to whatever exists (nothing exists that does not fit under such categories), and also [2] the *ultimate* or *most general* or *fundamental* essential divisions of reality which range across entities just in virtue of existing.[[8]](#footnote-9) Lowe thinks that there is no *a priori* knowledge which of these categories obtain. Instead, *a priori* knowledge of modality consists in knowing the possible essences of things (essences being a ‘special kind of proposition,’ a real definition of what a thing is or could be, rather than ‘a special kind of entity’).[[9]](#footnote-10) Lowe therefore insists that metaphysicians require reflection on experience, and particularly the results of natural science, in order to discover which ontological categories are actual, since we do not have *a priori* knowledge that any such categories are metaphysically necessary.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Tuomas Tahko has defended Lowe’s overall outlook without buying into the specific views Lowe had regarding modal epistemology. Tahko is sympathetic to an approach closer to what is called ‘naturalized’ metaphysics, on which metaphysics does not rely on anything like *a priori* knowledge of essences but works out the structural (read: modal) commitments of scientific theories. He even questions whether there is any serious distinction between the purported *a priori* methodology of analytic metaphysics as opposed to the purportedly *a posteriori* methodology characterizing naturalized metaphysics.[[11]](#footnote-12) In the end, however, Tahko’s response helpfully points out that, if the skepticism about metaphysics consists merely in skepticism about modal knowledge, the criticisms of metaphysics would not be very serious. Everyone has problems explaining modal epistemology! But Tahko insists, like Lowe, that modal knowledge remains central to metaphysics.

The fundamental problem for both Lowe and Tahko is that we could not do scientific reasoning, and make judgments about what is actual, without criteria for the identity (and persistence, etc.) of things.[[12]](#footnote-13) Tahko even goes beyond Lowe in arguing that we need to have modal knowledge not only of what things might exist, but specifically “which object a given set of conditions is associated with.”[[13]](#footnote-14) For instance, imagine see an object that is red –how do we discover whether redness is essential to that object? One way is to see if that object can persist despite being not red, or if there are any non-red instances of the kind. Both ‘tests’ would require us to know what the conditions of the persistence or identity of that object are; we must know *modal* facts about the *kind* of thing it is. Tahko believes this shows us that modal knowledge is required to make judgments about what is actual. Scientific work is needed to clarify which ontological categories obtain. Nevertheless, scientific data is uninterpretable except in light of modal intuitions. We need to already be able to apply ‘object’ and ‘essence’ and relevant modal notions before we can conclude, for example, that the scientific evidence supports the existence of the Higgs boson.[[14]](#footnote-15) “The a priori work required…does not concern an analysis of the *concepts* of ‘mass’ and ‘energy,’ but rather the *natures* of mass and energy.”[[15]](#footnote-16) So, in the end, Tahko agrees with Lowe. We must know *a priori* at least some fundamental truths about metaphysical modality because we would be unable to make judgments as to what is actual without it. That is, objective knowledge of metaphysical modality is a prerequisite to judging what is actual.

1. A More Serious Challenge to the Possibility of Metaphysics

Lowe therefore proposes metaphysics is an “*a priori* discipline concerned with revealing, through rational reflection and argument, the essences of entities, both actual and possible, with a view to articulating the fundamental structure of reality as a whole.”[[16]](#footnote-17) Metaphysics requires, therefore, that we have some way to discover “objective or real possibility, at least some grasp of which is an indispensable prerequisite for the acquisition of any empirical knowledge of actuality.”[[17]](#footnote-18) But Lowe and Tahko miss that the critics, including van Fraassen, are not attacking the very possibility of modal truth, or even that judgments about what is actual would require such modal knowledge. Critics propose that modal knowledge is not *objective* or that we can know what is actual in various ways without knowing what is *possible*/*necessary.*

van Fraassen fundamentally agrees with Lowe that we could not judge whether the entities posited in scientific contexts ‘really exist’ or are ‘objectively’ actual if we lacked objective modal knowledge. We can know what is true or exists within in many context-sensitive domains without the further claim is that we know what *really* or *essentially* or *objectively* is true or exists, ‘true’ or ‘exists’ thus extending across all contexts and domains. van Fraassen merely takes a *modus tollens* to Lowe’s *modus ponens*, arguing that scientific investigation can get on without the view that scientific investigation concerns the *essences* of things, as opposed to facts about what is observable, and therefore that Lowe is wrong in his assumption that scientific investigation arrives at truths that involve essential or objective modal claims. Tahko and Lowe’s view of metaphysics might correspondingly rely on a commitment to scientific realism, and so is dialectically effective against those committed to realism. But, if someone like van Fraassen does not accept these views, they need some other way to argue that we have objective modal knowledge sufficient for metaphysics. Their appeal to *a priori* knowledge might be necessary since they have ruled out experience alone as a source of this knowledge. If we necessarily employ objective modal knowledge about essence to make judgments about what exists or is true, then experience alone without such knowledge cannot supply it, and objective modal knowledge is necessarily only *a priori*.

Not only does principled dependence of metaphysics on *a priori* objective modal knowledge seem unnecessary, but it might even open us to more profound forms of metaphysical skepticism than those posed by van Fraassen. Many species of contemporary skeptics are inspired by Rudolf Carnap’s criticisms of metaphysics, alleging semantic problems for metaphysics. These skeptics argue, broadly, that no good sense can be given to ‘objective’ claims of any kind or are otherwise error theorists about any such claims to, e.g., unrestricted quantification, objective modality claims, and so forth.[[18]](#footnote-19) There are attempts to respond non-dismissively to these problems.[[19]](#footnote-20) It is plausible, however, that other responses are susceptible to structurally similar dilemmas as the approach of Lowe and Tahko.[[20]](#footnote-21)

1. Carnap’s Insight into Existence

A metaphysician might respond by giving a (dismissive) response that treats such skeptical arguments as presupposing a need for infallible epistemic access:

“The skeptics are right that we cannot ‘get behind’ our concepts or faculties to evaluate them epistemically, without appeal to other epistemic faculties. It is therefore true that we can have no infallible knowledge of modality or quantification, and that all our knowledge is fallible… but who cares? These skeptical arguments have not shown us that our knowledge of what exists or of modality, unless knowledge requires that we know that we know. But that is a contentious assumption we can simply deny. Further, while we might not have knock-down reasons to convince the skeptic our knowledge of modality is objective, i.e., *infallible* or indubitable evidence, but we can give *fallible* evidence, such as track-record arguments. As scientific realists argue, our progress in science would involve an apparent miracle if our modal beliefs were not objectively accurate. Consequently, metaphysicians should just ignore these skeptics and work ahead on the hypothesis that our knowledge is objective, and thus provide evidence that the skeptics are wrong.”[[21]](#footnote-22)

An epistemic response fails to engage the skeptic since, if knowledge of modality (of what was possible) was logically prior to engaging in judgements of what is actual, it would be in principle *impossible* to give this epistemological response. The skeptic does not allege that we need infallible evidence that we know our modal knowledge is objective. Rather, the point is that we cannot even coherently judge that our knowledge is objective, or, that it can be known not to be objective. What the skeptic alleges is not simply that we cannot *know* objective facts, but that the semantic facts entail that our judgments are not objective, either (allegedly) because of some fact essential to semantic generally or because the concept of ‘objectivity,’ or the operations involved in unrestricted quantification, entail contradictions. Appeal to track record arguments, for instance, would be unhelpful. We could not have fallible evidence that confirms a hypothesis that our knowledge is objective if it were impossible to coherently state the hypothesis or if we knew *a priori* that the hypothesis was necessarily false. That is what the skeptics allege.[[22]](#footnote-23)

To motivate a distinct potential metametaphysics that is an alternative to that proposed by Lowe/Tahko, I will first try to distill the objection. Carnap is widely thought to have alleged something like a *logical* contradiction in the enterprise of metaphysics. As Carnap inspired many modern skeptics, my focus on Carnap alone hopefully has *prima facie* plausibility as representing the spirit of metaphysical skepticism. Carnap famously drew a distinction between internal and external questions:

If someone wishes to speak in his language about a new kind of entities, he has to introduce a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules; we shall call this procedure the construction of a linguistic *framework* for the new entities in question. And now we must distinguish two kinds of questions of existence: first, questions of the existence of certain entities of the new kind *within the framework*; we call them *internal* questions; and second, questions concerning the existence or reality *of the framework itself*, called *external* questions.[[23]](#footnote-24)

The concept of ’reality’ referred to when asking internal questions “is an empirical, scientific, non-metaphysical concept. To recognize something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the framework of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognized as real, according to the rules of the framework.”[[24]](#footnote-25) Carnap alleges that the external questions are problematic. There are certain frameworks, for example, which refer to ‘things’ or ‘objects,’ and Carnap cannot make sense of a way to formulate what it would mean to call into question the reality of ‘thing worlds’: “the thesis of the reality of the thing world cannot be among these statements [within the framework], because it cannot be formulated in the thing language or, it seems, in any other theoretical language.”[[25]](#footnote-26)

Carnap concludes that such questions can only be given sense as a question of a largely pragmatic choice to prefer one framework over another, for reasons independent of frameworks, including the way in which one framework might be more efficient in dealing with certain problems, or the way in which such frameworks cohere better with other theoretical knowledge. “However, it would wrong to describe this situation by saying: ‘The fact of efficiency of the thing language is confirming evidence the reality of the thing world’; we should rather say instead: "This fact makes it advisable to accept the thing language.’”[[26]](#footnote-27) Once one accepts a given framework, there are no substantive questions about what entities exist internal to the framework, since “the answers are found, not by empirical investigation based on observations, but by logical analysis based on the rules for the new expressions.”[[27]](#footnote-28)

Carnap’s argumentation is implicit, and interpretation controversial, but the argumentation might be made explicit as follows based on facts about semantics, which represents broadly the spirit of both species of contemporary metaphysical skepticism. Carnap thought that his argument, if successful, would show that internal ‘ontological’ questions analytic and trivial (following simply from the rules of the framework and its expressions), and some skeptics today defend this position in modified form,[[28]](#footnote-29) but I will contend that Carnap’s core contention does not depend on a view of analyticity (which was criticized later).[[29]](#footnote-30) Focus simply on quantifiers and other logical operators as an example by which to reconstruct a similar argument. Logical operators, such as the quantifiers, are functionally defined within a given framework of logical operators. Often, operators and general structural terms are inter-definable. Further, we could have chosen distinct terms or operators to go about our business. Perhaps we can show that categorization in general is a contingent enterprise: we can show there are always multiple, truth-equivalent ways of categorizing the world, as in the case it is possible to engage in ‘conceptual engineering,’ for example, and reshape our ontological categorization; or in translation (ala Hirsch) between distinct truth-equivalent schemes by which to categorize entities.[[30]](#footnote-31) Which way we select to categorize the world seems a pragmatic question.

More fundamentally, there seems to be a problem involved in attempting to call into question whether any given framework is *real.* Evaluating whether that framework itself is ‘real’ in some relevant sense requires semantic ascent to a distinct meta-language from which we evaluate the framework, expressed in an object-language. Aiming to construct some truth evaluation within the object-language itself, that is, have the truth predicates of a language within that language itself (as Tarski showed), would generate a contradiction.[[31]](#footnote-32) These facts therefore seem to preclude the possibility of anything like absolutely unrestricted quantification, which seems to be that upon which metaphysics depends. (A similar objection can be reformulated in terms of explanatory success.)[[32]](#footnote-33)

What the skeptic thus aims to show us, on my reconstruction of Carnapian insights, is that there are no ontological categories in the sense that Lowe/Tahko mean. If there are some senses in which there are such divisions of ways things ‘exist’, those ontological categories do not correspond or refer to anything that is like a *natural kind* of existing, that is, a kind whose membership is essential to its members.[[33]](#footnote-34) Those categories are, it is alleged, necessarily not ‘modally robust’ or ‘objective’ because existence does not come in different varieties. Asserting that something exists is simply to assert that it falls under a sortal of some kind or populates a domain, or something of this sort.[[34]](#footnote-35) Thomasson reasons similarly in criticizing the notion of ‘carving at the joints’ of reality:

…logic is topic-neutral, then its topic is not the structure of the world; unlike the terminology of biology, political science, or physics, it is not attempting to map the structure of a particular part of reality. Once we have a formal/material distinction in hand, we can suggest a picture like this: some material predicates may be designed to carve the world at (certain of its) joints, to map a certain structure— for example, a structure of the world into biological or physical natural kinds. But the distinctive feature of logical terms is that they may apply to material terms of any kind, indifferent to the distinctions among the objects and properties described, or the domains discussed.[[35]](#footnote-36)

1. The Metametaphysics of Form

The Carnapian analysis of existence needs a counterpoint. My proposal involves presenting a scholastic approach to ‘existence’ and ‘being’. Scholastics such as Cajetan, John of St. Thomas, Capreolus, and Domingo Banez developed and defended an account of existence that, I propose, might circumvent the skeptical worries, and constitute a more naturalistic approach to metaphysics. In what follows, I will largely abstract from history to present chief facets of consensus on these matters from the scholastics which we might use to construct a general theory of existence and show the way in which this corresponds to or differs from contemporary views. For my purposes here, the historical details are secondary to presenting a theory of existence and a justification of the possibility of metaphysics that undermines the skeptical conclusions.

These scholastics begin with the ‘analogy of being’ doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, derived from Aristotle. Aquinas claimed, following Aristotle, that ‘being’ [*ens*] is predicated analogously of its instances.[[36]](#footnote-37) John Duns Scotus argued in favor of rejecting this view with an argument that, if ‘being’ meant different things in different contexts, we could not reason about God from His created effects (for instance), as that would seem to involve equivocation in what it would *mean* to attribute anything to God as a subject of predication/judgment.[[37]](#footnote-38) This is similar to contemporary arguments against distinct senses of the existential quantifier.

Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, a Renaissance Thomist, responded to Scotus’ attacks by developing an account of the way in which existence and being are attributed analogously. In contrast to contemporary metaphysicians who advocate for distinct meanings of the existential quantifier (ala Meinong), the Thomists did not agree. The only wanted to affirm that ‘being’ is cross-categorial. That is, it is just analytic that anything at all can be said to ‘exist’ or be an ‘entity’.[[38]](#footnote-39) Cajetan therefore argued that what ‘being’ *refers to* is not the same in each instance but agreed that there is one concept (or sense) for ‘being’ [*ens*] which ranges over any categories or domains or other ways of classifying anything. This concept ‘being’ is necessarily indeterminate or indistinct among the different ways that anything could exist, since it needs to be able to be applied to anything at all (he referred to it as a ‘confused’ concept, but ‘indistinct’ is a better translation).[[39]](#footnote-40) Attributing ‘being’ is then to *mean* the same thing in each instance, so there is no equivocation in inferences,[[40]](#footnote-41) even though Cajetan notes that this concept can be clarified from an ’imperfect’ to a ‘perfect’ concept through *a posteriori* discovery – that is, we discover what kinds of things fall under ‘being’ (and so clarify the extension of the indeterminate concept) through empirical investigation.[[41]](#footnote-42)

The scholastics generally held that attributing being or existence to anything involves two mental operations: being aware of X *and* judging that X is, simpliciter (with a quantifier) or in some way (with a predicate). Cajetan proposes an epistemic story in virtue of which we can acquire this concept from our knowledge acquired only from sense experience, plus the capacities to attend to experience and to judge it.[[42]](#footnote-43) On his account, the concept of ‘being’ or ‘existence’ is like the concept of ‘predication/judgment’ generally. If we wanted to give a characterization of what it is to predicate one thing of another, we would depict it as ‘*F is x*’ with variables, precisely to indicate that anything could be put in those places. Attributing ‘being’ to something is not the same as that of ‘predication,’ however, as what it is for something to be some way or another has nothing to do with our concepts or judgments. To ‘exist’ or be a ‘being’ is not then merely to be a subject of attribution. The point can be gathered by noting that the scholastic view is surprisingly closely allied to a Fregean view of existence, as Peter van Inwagen understands it.

Van Inwagen notes that existence is something *like* a second-order predicate,[[43]](#footnote-44) as it is like number, but that the numbers in question do not concern our concepts themselves; when we speak of there being zero horses, i.e., that there exist no horses, this is a judgment about *horses,* not about the concept ‘horse’.[[44]](#footnote-45) Cajetan similarly distinguishes that what ‘being’ signifies or refers tois always *some* definite way that something exists (the ‘objective concept’ of ‘being,’ in Cajetan’s terminology[[45]](#footnote-46)), even though the sense of the concept by which we refer (‘formal concept’) is indeterminate to any way that anything is. Thus, to exist is not merely to be the satisfaction conditions of a predicate or the truth conditions of a proposition. Understanding predicates (and quantifiers) as simply referring to satisfaction conditions would likely generate a contradiction.[[46]](#footnote-47) The *existence* *predicate* is like a truth predicate; it cannot be coherently characterized except by semantic ascent to a meta-language. Similarly, existence cannot both be a (real) property and be such that it is a property logically prior to all properties or objects whatsoever (for that would be viciously circular). These considerations are exactly the basis for Cajetan’s conclusion (following Aristotle) that ‘being’ or ‘existence’ is predicated analogously and that ‘being’ is not a *genus,* some property or feature essential to and shared in common by all those things that exist.[[47]](#footnote-48) Attributing existence is not then to attribute a specific first-order property to anything, just as falling under the scope of the concept ‘being’ is not to possess some property common to all beings.

So, what *is* existence, on the scholastic model? The Thomistic view implies that ‘being’, or ‘existence’ is a kind of *determinable.* Determinables are “type-level properties that stand in a distinctive specification relation,” and which have varying degrees of specification that are relative to the type. For example, “*color* is a determinable having *red*, *blue*, and other specific shades of color as determinates[and] *red* is a determinate of *color* and a determinable of *scarlet*.”[[48]](#footnote-49) Determination specification relations are not genus-species relations, since “in contrast with the disjunction-disjunct relation, where disjuncts may be dissimilar and compatible (as with *red or round*), determinates of a determinable (at a given level of specificity) are both similar and incompatible (*red* and *blue* are similar in both being colors; nothing can be simultaneously and uniformly both *red* and *blue*).”[[49]](#footnote-50) In short, the scholastics think of ‘being’ as a determinable that has indefinitely many determinates: ways of existing, i.e., something that counts as ‘being’ some way*.*[[50]](#footnote-51)

This scholastic account of existence entails that ‘being’ is conceptually implicated in every instance we attribute anything of or to any subject; that is why ‘being’ is the most primitive concept we have.[[51]](#footnote-52) It is important, however, to specify that to predicate being is to predicate *actualities* of the subject. Cajetan does not think (like Aquinas) that any predicate or name refers to something that exists; there are names for things that do not exist, like phoenixes and goatstags. Yet, these scholastics do not hold that a proposition containing a non-referring term is meaningless, but merely that it fails to attribute actuality to anything in virtue of failing to refer (Aquinas thus treats ‘blindness’ as a property which we can attribute truly but denies that it has existential import – blindness is not aproperty that refers to an actuality, but a lack of it). Overall, none of this should be surprising, since it looks equivalent to a vision of truthmaking or at least that truth supervenes on being. Nevertheless, that is not quite correct.

It might be surprising that Aquinas and the Thomistic school hold predication itself generally involves attributing actuality. That is, they hold both that true predication of a subject does not necessarily carry existential import (not all terms in a true proposition necessarily refer) *and* every predication, by reason of logical form, signifies being actual in some way.[[52]](#footnote-53) This is not as mysterious as it seems and does not require a strong ‘correspondence’ doctrine of truth.[[53]](#footnote-54) The point is only to distinguish truth from reference. No proposition needs to refer to anything, although *being a true proposition* connotes a way that something is (and, in this case, it is *the proposition* that is actual in some way by being true). Thus, Aquinas thinks ‘truth’ *connotes* ‘being.’[[54]](#footnote-55) Every true proposition, even if the terms contained in the proposition refer to nothing, connotes actuality merely in terms of its form.

This last term is used in logic but latches on to an important medieval concept which clarifies this scholastic approach to metaphysics. ‘Form’ is a functional term within Aristotelian and medieval metaphysics: a ‘form’ refers to some way of being actual or existing. Whatever it is in virtue of which something is actual is a form. This follows, we might notice, from the scholastic commitments that ‘being’ is a determinable which implicitly includes all possible ways to be. Since ‘being’ is a determinable, nothing that actually exists exemplifies *merely* existing in a generic way. Instead, everything that is actual is actual *in some way.* That gives us the idea of ‘form’: forms are simply whatever it is in virtue of which something counts as an instance of the determinable ‘being.’ That is, forms are whatever specify the determinates of being. A determinate might just *be* a form, as God or the angels are actualities. But many scholastics held a metaphysics on which material objects were not just identical with forms, but that material objects *had* forms.[[55]](#footnote-56) The scholastic view of ‘being’ as a determinable ensures that ‘being’ itself conceptually or *a priori* comes in no kinds, so these divisions of the kind of ways things could exist are not knowable without empirical investigation.

What differentiates the scholastic theory from Fregean theories of existence (in at least a popular form) is that any given form is essentially a way of being actual, but this does not specify whether any given form *necessarily* *exists*. Falling under a sortal or populating a domain, then, does not *ipso facto* entail existence. It is essential to every form that a form makes predications true, whether those truths are contingent or necessary. Nevertheless, being a form does not essentially involve being either essentially contingent or necessarily existent, as forms must be essentially such as to range over any possible kind of existence. (Thomas Aquinas, on this basis, argues for his well-known ‘real distinction’ between essence and existence).[[56]](#footnote-57)

The scholastic metametaphysics clearly differs from the Lowe/Tahko and Siderian approach to metaphysics: it cannot be that our knowledge of what is actual could be logically prior to experience, since ‘being’ is a determinable that necessarily has no specific content. ‘Being’ is not a *genus*, the scholastics would insist, since the differentia of each species would themselves exemplify ‘being.’ The scholastics agree that the fundamental intuitions of the skeptical arguments of the Carnapian is essentially sound, but that these arguments merely show that ‘being’ is not a genus or a class. The skeptics have not undermined metaphysics. An ‘ontological category’ should not be understood as an *essential* division of ‘being’. That is akin to a category mistake.

When we refer actuality or being to a subject, that is usually to refer to a subject as having a property or falling under a class of some kind. The ‘ontological’ categories of the scholastics are the highest, most inclusive kinds of properties or classes there are. They are divisions of ‘being’ in the sense that each is a determinate, one way of exemplifying actuality which is *incompatible* with other ways. For example, if something is a property-bearer (a substance), it could not also be a property. Knowing that one property or class *is not* another property or class, and that they cannot mutually be exemplified at the same time and same respect, is sufficient conditions for coming to know these divisions of ‘being.’ One then can naturalistically investigate whether and in what way these classes and properties relate to each other (since properties and classes are not given *a priori*), thus coming to know what those classes and properties *refer* *to*.

We can return to the question of modal metaphysics that we began with. The skeptical problems do not straightforwardly affect the scholastic metametaphysics of form since the framework implicitly concedes the skeptical critique of ‘objectivity.’ There is no such thing as the objectivity the skeptics are looking for. But that kind of objectivity is not required to know or state that something exists or is actual. Metaphysics can then begin in our investigation of *what* exists or is actual, that is, the *nature* or *form* of what we are judging to exist or be actual, since to attribute ‘being’ is always and necessarily to attribute some *specific* way that something exists or is actual.[[57]](#footnote-58) As long as there are facts about natures or forms of what exists, metaphysics is possible.

Skeptics might allege: “Doesn’t *actuality* presume a modal context? If so, it looks as if the scholastics have reintroduced *a priori* modal knowledge by appealing to a primitive concept of ‘being.’” The scholastic framework understands ‘actuality’ as a term which differs in sense from ‘existence’ or ‘being,’ but which refers to the same thing. So, while it is true that ‘actuality’ connotes possibility or necessity in terms of its sense, what it refers to is simply *existence*. ‘Being’ does not involve a modal context. Thus, it is truth-equivalent to talk about what is actual or what exists. “But can we know what is actual without, at least at the same time, coming to know modal facts?” The scholastic metametaphysics of form need take no stance on this question. Clearly, if we acquire modal knowledge simultaneously with knowing what is actual, scholastic metametaphysics has no problem accommodating modal knowledge; if modal facts about possible properties or classes were somehow known *a priori,* the scholastic paradigm can accommodate that too.

Nevertheless, an empiricist epistemology of someone like Bas van Fraassen aligns well with the scholastic paradigm. On empiricist views like his, knowledge of what is actual does not require knowledge of modal facts. Any modal claims relative to what is possible and necessary are fundamentally grounded in knowledge derived from sensation or observation. These epistemologies deny that modal claims about possibility and necessity have objective truth value since “[modal claims about possibility and necessity] are in general context-dependent. The context in which they are asserted is one in which the speaker is holding something fixed, which together with the antecedent implies the consequent. What is held fixed tends to include a good deal of unformulated general opinion, but also some features specific to the case. The conditional has a truth value, relative to such a context; but that value will vary with context.”[[58]](#footnote-59) Nevertheless, these views do not deny we know ‘objective’ non-modal truths.

If these empiricist epistemologies are true, then it follows we can know facts about what is actual without knowing other modal facts about what is possible/necessary. Our knowledge of what is actual can then be context-dependent in various ways, but if we can know the truth about *anything at all,* we can do metaphysics. We can ‘ascend’ semantically, reflecting on the nature and character of experience, and come to ask what we are referring to or what the satisfaction or truth conditions are for those propositions regarding our experience. Those are the *forms* in question. Metaphysics is off and running.

The scholastic might also argue that their views are preferable to the deflationary views, since my imagined version of Carnap gave skeptical arguments which rule out his own account of existence, and thus should drive him toward anti-realism about existence. Carnap’s account of existence clearly makes substantive and controversial metaphysical assumptions which conflict with the deflationary approach: on his account, existence can only be attributed to *material* objects or properties. Yet, if it is senseless to talk about anything being essentially or *really* so-and-such*,* it seems senseless to refer to what is ‘material,’ since that refers to nothing. And that points to a deeper problem for Carnapian deflationary metaphysics: if the problem with metaphysics is that it involves speaking about what things *really* are, then the deflationary metaphysics cannot be stated coherently. That is, we have a dilemma.

Carnap generically denies that any truths about what exists are ‘really’ or ‘objectively’ true, that is, true in such a way that they would be true within any framework. Naturally, these claims are true within a meta-language or framework. If Carnap concedes that these are *truths,* then we have metaphysics, since the language does not prohibit acquiring or expressing further truths about what things are, within that framework. There is actuality, and we express it in many different truth-equivalent ways. These facts do not mean there is nothing to be known, or nothing that it is to be anything, just that there are different ways of expressing what those things are.

If Carnap wants to block such claims, and insist this is not ‘really’ metaphysics, because these truths make no claim about what things are ‘objectively,’ we could ask what he might mean by ‘objectively’. Perhaps Carnap means that we are insisting that our own truths *are true,* and so we need to ascend out of our object-language into a meta-language to express what truth is, and thus Carnap believes the facts of semantic ascent illustrate that we cannot coherently express *what it is for things to exist* within the same language we use to express the truths *about* what exists. But this is no problem, since expressing what things are is what it is to attribute existence. We attribute existence or being without ascending to a meta-language. We only ascend to the meta-language to describe what is going on – to *identify* instances of attributing being, actuality, existence in the target-language. If Carnap’s criticisms imply that ascending to a meta-language means the claims *about* the target-language are necessarily false, that would be too strong, implicating in incoherence his own attempts to do linguistic philosophy. That is, at some level, the claims must be *true.* Metaphysics is off and running again.

If Carnap wants instead to double down, he can attempt to be deflationary about truth. But the kind of deflationism about truth required to circumvent the scholastic framework is serious and austere. The only ways to be skeptical about the scholastic metametaphysics involve either agnosticism about whether anything signifies anything, denying that anything signifies anything, or affirming that anything signifies anything – quietism, alethic nihilism, and dialethism, respectively. Each of these will involve arguments that I take to be the only metaphysical skepticism worth its salt, as they will need to contend for a necessarily *global,* austere nominalism about ‘being’ itself.[[59]](#footnote-60) Historically, metametaphysical debates among scholastics largely occurred within controversies about the nature of universals.[[60]](#footnote-61) That is no coincidence. However, for my purposes, I believe I have shown that scholastic metametaphysics of form bears serious consideration, not least of which because the only serious contender for rejecting scholastic metametaphysics involves engaging in a substantive metaphysical debate. This is exactly what we should expect, if we embrace the scholastic framework, as there is no science prior to metaphysics.

1. Jonathan Schaffer, “On what grounds what,” in *Metametaphysics,* eds. D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 348-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Bas van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Bradley Monton and Bas C. van Fraassen, “Constructive Empiricism and Modal Nominalism,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* Vol. 54, No. 3 (Sep. 2003): 405-422, esp. 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. EJ Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics,* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics,* 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics,* 11-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. E.J. Lowe, “What Is the Source of our Knowledge of Modal Truths?” *Mind* 121 (2012): 919–950. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Lowe, *Possibility of Metaphysics,* 23-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Tuomas Tahko, “A Priori and A Posteriori,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Metametaphysics*, eds. Ricki Bliss and JTM Miller (Routledge, 2020), 353–363. See also Tuomas Tahko, “In defence of Aristotelian metaphysics,” in *Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics,* ed. T. Tahko(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. cf., Tahko, “A Priori and A Posteriori,” 28-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Tuomas Tahko, “Metaphysics as the First Philosophy,” in *Aristotle on Method and Metaphysics,* ed. Edward Feser (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Tahko, “Metaphysics as the First Philosophy,” 62-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Tahko, “In Defence of Aristotelian Metaphysics,” 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. EJ Lowe, “The Rationality of Metaphysics,” in *Synthese* 178 (2011): 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See Amie Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. 39-40; Eli Hirsch, “Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* Vol. LXX, No. 1 (Jan. 2005): 67-97 & “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” *Philosophical Issues,* 12 (2002): 51-72; David Chalmers, “Ontological Anti-Realism,” in *Metametaphysics,* eds. D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) & *Constructing the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 103-104. Jan Westerhoff, *Ontological Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 281-282, 291 & “An Argument for Ontological Nihilism,” *Inquiry* (2021): https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1934268, esp. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. E.g., Theodore Sider, *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. See Javier Cumpa, “The Regress Argument Against Realism About Structure,” *Inquiry* 66, 5(2023): ; Nicholas Stang, “How is Metaphysics Possible,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Vol. XX, Part XX (2023): https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoad013. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. For an instance of such a response, see Michael Rea, “Realism in Theology and Metaphysics,” in *Essays in Analytic Theology*: Volume 1 (Oxford University Press, 2020), 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. See, for example, the metasemantic argument in Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy,* 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Carnap, 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Rudolf Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 4, No. 11 (Jan. 1950): 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Carnap, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Carnap, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Carnap, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Amie Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. 36-40, 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Hannes Leitgeb and André Carus, "Rudolf Carnap", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/carnap/carnap-quine.html, Supplement “Carnap versus Quine on the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Herman Cappellen, *Fixing Language: Conceptual Engineering and the Limits of Revision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Jc Beall, Michael Glanzberg, and David Ripley, "Liar Paradox", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/liar-paradox/, 4.3.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. For two flavors, see Otávio Bueno, “Dispensing with Facts, Substances, and Structures,” in *American Philosophical Quarterly,* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Jan 2023):49-61; Nicholas Stang, “How is Metaphysics Possible,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol.* XX*, Part* XX (2023): 13, https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoad013: “… the explanatory success of a metaphysical theory… depends upon the language in which it is formulated.” [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. The argument for ontological anti-realism is thus like arguments against natural kind realism in other domains; cf. Anjan Chakravartty, “Last Chance Saloons for Natural Kind Realism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly,* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Jan. 2023): 63-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. See, e.g., Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*, 82-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*, 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Metaphysicae,* Bk IV, nn. 534-543; Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. See, e.g., John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*I, d. 3, pars 1, q. 1–2, nn. 26–55;d. 8, pars 1, q. 3,nn. 80-89*.* For a clear summary of the dispute, see Thomas Ward, *Ordered by Love* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2022)*,* 26-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Far from being sympathetic to contemporary ‘ways of being’ talk, this framework is opposed to views like, e.g., Kris McDaniel, *Fragmentation of Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’ ‘On Being and Essence,’* trans. L. Kenzierski and F. Wade (Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 1964, reprinted 2011), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Cajetan responds to Scotus’ arguments about univocity explicitly in *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’ ‘On Being and Essence,’* 77-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. See Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, *The Analogy of Names, and the Concept of Being,* trans. Edward Bushinski (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1953), 80-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Cajetan, *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’ ‘On Being and Essence,’* 40-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. For scholastics, ‘being’ is a first-order predicate, but involves standing in a special relation – it is a determinable, like ‘having number’ – discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Cf. Peter van Inwagen, *Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), ch. 3, esp. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Cajetan, *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’ ‘On Being and Essence,’* 67-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Cf. Marcin Tkaczyk, “Robert Trueman’s Defence of Higher-Order Logic,” *Logic and Logical Philosophy* (2023): http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LLP.2023.006, esp. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* 998b23, 1059b31. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Jessica Wilson, "Determinables and Determinates", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/determinate-determinables/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. See Capreolus, In ST I, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, a. 1, conc. 3; Cajetan, *De Ente et Essentia,* c. 5, q. 11, ad. 8; Domingo Banez, *The Primacy of Existence in Thomas Aquinas* [*Scholastica Commentaria in Primam Partam Angelici Doctoris ad Sexagesimam Quartem Quaestionem,* 1584]*,* trans. (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co., 1966), 33-43; cf. Patrick Zoll, *What it is to exist* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), ch. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Cajetan, *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’ ‘On Being and Essence,’* 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* XII, q. 1, ad 1; cf. *In I Sent.* 19.5.1 ad 1; *In III Sent.* 5; 7.1.1; *Summa Theologiae* I q. 39, a. 6 ad 2; q. 39, a. 5, ad 4; *De Potentia* q. 7, a. 2, ad 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Aquinas’ position on existence or truth alone does not seem to entail commitment to truthmaking, and there are contemporary examples which illustrate how these come apart: e.g., Treton Merricks defends realism about truth while rejecting a correspondence theory; *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)*,* ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. E.g., *De Veritate,* q. 1, a. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. See an extended defense of this analysis in James Dominic Rooney, *Material Objects in Confucian and Aristotelian Metaphysics* (New York, NY: Bloomsburg Academic, 2022): 71-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Since the scholastics held that angels are subsisting immaterial forms that do not essentially/necessarily exist (since they are created), whereas God does exist in that way, they had clear cases to make these distinctions evident. For background on these arguments, see Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas’s Way to God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. This is complicated in one special case, as God exists concretely not as ‘being generically considered’ but ‘existence itself subsisting’; see Eleonore Stump, “The Nature of a Simple God.” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association 87* (2013): 33-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Bradley Monton and Bas van Fraassen, “Constructive Empiricism and Modal Nominalism,” *British Journal for Philosophy of Science* 51 (2003): 410. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Cf. Jamin Asay calls these ‘hard road nominalists’ in *A Theory of Truthmaking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)*,* c. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. See Gyula Klima, "The Medieval Problem of Universals", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/universals-medieval/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)