

26/06/2022

This paper is forthcoming in a special issue of *Argumenta* on the epistemology of metaphysics.  
Please cite published version when available.

## Understanding with epistemic possibilities: The epistemic aim and value of metaphysics

Ylwa Sjölin Wirling

University of Gothenburg

University of Manchester

### Abstract

According to a recent proposal, the epistemic aim of metaphysics as a discipline is to chart the different viable theories of metaphysical objects of inquiry (e.g. causation, persistence). This paper elaborates on and seeks to improve on that proposal in two related ways. First, drawing on an analogy with how-possibly explanation in science, I argue that we can usefully understand this aim of metaphysics as the charting of epistemically possible answers to metaphysical questions. Second, I argue that in order to account for the epistemic goodness of this aim, one should appeal to the epistemic value it has in virtue of providing resources for non-factive understanding of the objects of metaphysical inquiry.

### 1. Introduction

This paper takes off from two claims about metaphysics as a collective, epistemic endeavour. First, the familiar observation that metaphysics as a discipline is plagued by systematic, persistent disagreement between researchers who we take to be equally competent, applying the same methods, and who are all among the experts on the topic. I'll refer to this as Unresolved Dispute. Second, the decision to take seriously the fact that some instances of metaphysical inquiry and its products (e.g. metaphysical accounts or theories) are assessed *positively* by its own lights – i.e. in line with the norms and standards of epistemic assessment that apparently govern the discipline. I'll refer to this assumption as Successful Metaphysics.

Given what we may call the “standard view” of metaphysics’ epistemic aim, the observation Unresolved Dispute and the assumption Successful Metaphysics are in tension.

According to the standard view, the epistemic aim of metaphysics is to produce theories that provide knowledge of true answers to metaphysical questions, and the epistemic success of metaphysics is to be judged in relation to this aim. But Unresolved Dispute indicates that this aim is not being furthered by actual metaphysical inquiry. To those who wish to take seriously Successful Metaphysics, this suggests that the standard view is mistaken, and the norms and standards that govern metaphysics must flow from some different epistemic aim.

In this paper, I focus on a recent attempt to *reconceive* of metaphysics' epistemic aim in order to accommodate both Unresolved Dispute and Successful Metaphysics. According to this proposal, the aim of metaphysics is to chart the various tenable accounts of metaphysics' objects of inquiry (e.g. causation, modality, and so on). The aim of this paper is to develop and complement this proposal. In particular, I will raise what I call the Value Question for this "equilibrism" proposal and then sketch a two-part answer to that question. I will first suggest that we should understand this aim in terms epistemic possibility: the aim is to construct and chart epistemically possible answers to metaphysical questions. Then I will argue that metaphysics, when understood in this way – along with other epistemic activities that have a similar character and function, including art interpretation and certain practices of how-possibly modelling in science – is epistemically valuable in virtue of providing resources for what I call *non-factive understanding* of the objects of (in this case, metaphysical) inquiry.

## **2. Background: Problems with the Standard View**

It will be useful to begin by taking a look at what we may call the standard view on metaphysics' aim, and the problems that some philosophers see with it. I should note that purpose of this section is not to argue conclusively that the standard view is untenable, but merely to show why one might be motivated to pursue an alternative view like equilibrism.

I take the standard view to be a claim about the aim of metaphysics as a discipline. What do I mean by that? The aim of a discipline is the central, or primary epistemic aim around which the discipline is structured, and in terms of which we can understand its epistemic norms, which practitioners are required to comply with *qua* metaphysicians, and the epistemic assessments and evaluations that are made in the course of metaphysical inquiry. It is in relation to this aim that the general state or shape of the discipline is judged. That is, whether metaphysics makes (enough) epistemic progress, or is in good epistemic shape, depends on whether actual metaphysical practice

and its products relate appropriately to the discipline's epistemic aim.<sup>1</sup> The aim needs to be epistemic because metaphysics is supposed to be an *epistemic* activity, a form of inquiry.

We should recognise that the aim of metaphysics as a discipline may come apart from the aims that motivate individual metaphysicians to pursue their research. For instance, one may pursue metaphysics with the aim of achieving money or fame, but this does not make money or fame the aims of the discipline in question. This is of course not unique to metaphysics, but goes for other epistemic disciplines as well, and it applies also to the *epistemic* aims that individuals may have when pursuing a particular type of inquiry. Consider Sheila who goes into medical research with the sole motivation of securing knowledge for herself of how ovarian cancer can be cured. She is content to terminate inquiry as soon as she has discovered the answer, whether or not her results are scientifically acceptable, or whether anyone else ever comes to know about them. This arguably does not make Sheila's knowledge the epistemic aim of (this branch of) medical research.<sup>2</sup>

Relatedly, since the general epistemic shape of the discipline is judged in relation to its central epistemic aim, we should also recognise that the discipline may produce or instantiate some epistemic goods without being in epistemically good shape. E.g. the fact that astrology has produced some knowledge (of various false theories describing how movements of celestial bodies influence human affairs, say) does not make astrology a discipline in good epistemic shape. Conversely, being in epistemically bad shape as a discipline does not imply being entirely devoid of epistemic value.

According to what many refer to as the "standard view" of philosophy, the aim of philosophy as a discipline – in the sense just outlined – is to uncover or attain knowledge of true answers to philosophical questions (see e.g. Brennan, 2010; Chalmers, 2015; Kornblith, 2013; Stoljar, 2017).<sup>3</sup> So, the epistemic quality of the discipline is judged by how philosophical practices and their products relate to this aim. Applied to metaphysics more specifically, the aim of metaphysics is, on the standard view, to uncover or attain knowledge of true answers to metaphysical questions (Kriegel, 2013, p. 1; Paul, 2012, p. 4). Metaphysical questions, as I understand them here, concern the underlying nature of the real world studied in science and everyday inquiry. The features of reality that metaphysical inquiry targets are normally prior to, more fundamental and more general, than those studied by the empirical sciences (Paul, 2012, pp.

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is not required that *all* instances of actual metaphysical practice, or all that comes out of it, are so related. Compare: not all instances of medical research, and not all results it produces, are in good standing by the discipline's own lights, but this doesn't licence rejection of the whole discipline as being in bad epistemic shape.

<sup>2</sup> See Nado (2019) for an argument to the effect that knowledge is typically not the aim of professional inquiry such as science or journalism.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper I focus exclusively on metaphysics, but much of what I will go on to say might apply equally well to philosophy more generally. But this is not a generalisation I will defend or make a point of here.

5-6). They include the nature of modality, causation, property instantiation, mereological composition, change, and so on.

I will take the standard view to hold that metaphysics aims at knowledge that is publicly accessible, or somehow shared or collective. This means I will not count as proponents of the standard view the philosophers who claim that it is enough for philosophy to be in good epistemic shape that a few individuals secure knowledge of the true answers to philosophical questions (see e.g. Cappelen, 2017; Keller, 2017). Note that the corresponding view would also be implausible for other large-scale, collective inquiries such as biology, economics, or medicine.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that some individual's private knowledge of e.g. the true nature of causation is not epistemically valuable. Again, a discipline's producing some items of epistemic value is not sufficient to render it in epistemically good shape as a discipline.

The idea that knowledge is the aim of inquiry has a plausible ring to it. So, why would one seek out an alternative to this idea that the collective epistemic endeavour of metaphysics aims at some form of collective or publicly available knowledge?

One motivation comes from what I call Unresolved Dispute, namely the fact that metaphysics is plagued by systematic, persistent disagreement between researchers who we take to be equally competent, applying the same methods, and who are all among the experts on the topic. This is so even if we can all agree with Frances (2017) that philosophers agree on a great number of claims about reasons or arguments, e.g. of the form “problem  $p$  constitute a serious challenge to a theory  $t$ ” or “ $f$  is a powerful reason in favour of  $t$ ”. Our very best research in metaphysics has failed to result in anything like convergence on what the truth is with respect to e.g. the nature of modality, causation, properties, and so on. Wildly different and mutually incompatible theories are more or less equally supported in the sense centrally relevant to the discipline, and are considered live options that a metaphysicians may legitimately explore and defend.

Many prominent metaphysicians have, when pondering the subject, recognised that this situation is not going away: metaphysical disputes are not just unresolved, but in some sense irresolvable. Armstrong points out that the best one can do in metaphysics is to attempt to produce “visions (hopefully coherent) of the fundamental structure of the world, a vision that will compete with other visions”, but that it is folly to expect to settle which one of these visions is the correct one (2010, p. 1). In a famous passage, Lewis similarly notes that

when all is said and done, and all the tricky arguments and distinctions and counterexamples have been discovered, presumably we will still face the question which prices are worth paying,

---

<sup>4</sup> See Dellsén, Lawler, and Norton (forthcoming) for recent discussion of conceptions of progress in science and how they relate to the notion of progress in philosophy.

which theories are on balance credible, which are the unacceptably counterintuitive consequences and which are the acceptably counterintuitive ones. On this question we may still differ. And if all is indeed said and done, there will be no hope of discovering still further arguments to settle our differences (1983b, p. x).

That is, Unresolved Dispute is a well-known state of affairs – in metaphysics as in many other areas of philosophy.<sup>5</sup> As Dellsén et al. (forthcoming) correctly points out, whether Unresolved Dispute suggests that philosophy, or metaphysics in particular, is in bad epistemic shape depends on what one takes progress in the discipline to consist in – on what the aim of discipline is. But many philosophers have, *assuming the standard view*, argued that Unresolved Dispute suggests that philosophy is in a bad epistemic shape (e.g. Goldberg 2009; Fumerton 2010; Brennan 2010; Kornblith 2013; Beebe 2018). I will not go into the details of these arguments here, and I will not try to claim that they cannot be resisted or circumvented. Suffice it to say that the basic idea is that the kind of persistent disagreement between metaphysicians on the answers to the questions that the discipline allegedly seeks to answer knowledgeably, is at the very least a very strong reason to think that metaphysics has failed to produce any shared, collectively available knowledge of answers to those questions.

This has led several authors to a very pessimistic view of metaphysics. But there are reasons to resist this negative assessment of the discipline. Metaphysics, much like any other discipline of professional inquiry – is regulated by various epistemic norms for what researchers are obliged to do, and epistemic standards to which items such as theories, hypotheses, or claims are held. Among these norms and standards are practices for assessing theories and norms according to which theories with certain properties are to be considered better supported than others. It is reasonable to think that these norms and standards derive from the central epistemic aim of the discipline – that they are supposed to regulate inquiry in way that enables it to approximate or progress towards its aim.

In line with these norms and standards, several – but far from all – instances of metaphysical inquiry and its products, the metaphysical theories, are positively assessed. Metaphysicians regard the products of their epistemic practices – the metaphysical theories or accounts that are produced, scrutinised, refined, and sustained throughout the processes which

---

<sup>5</sup> Stoljar (2017) claims that there is actually a lot of agreement on central issues in philosophy – that is, he denies Unresolved Dispute. His vindication of philosophical progress in the standard sense relies on his insistence that philosophical problems have a particular structure, an assumption that can certainly be questioned. Frances (2017) also presents an impressive list of substantial claims that philosophers have established and agree upon. I see no reason to deny that there is such agreement (also in metaphysics), and I think the value of those results are captured well by the account I will go on present later in this paper. But it is nonetheless true that wildly different theories of the same phenomenon are considered equally viable, and there is little reason to think we will be able to adjudicate between them.

constitutes metaphysical research – as thereby having received epistemic support in the sense(s) relevant to the discipline. Those who fail to live up to the standards are discarded along the way. But as already noted, the standards that regulate metaphysical inquiry consistently allow for mutually incompatible and wildly different answers to the same question to be positively assessed in the sense centrally relevant to the discipline. If the aim of the discipline, from which the norms and standards are supposed to flow, is knowledge – as the standard view has it – then we may conclude that these norms and standards are woefully insufficient. But we *could* instead decide to take the norms and standards seriously, as in fact managing to regulate metaphysical inquiry in a way that enables it to promote its aim. Then, however, we will need to reconceive of the aim of metaphysics as a discipline, finding one that *is* plausibly promoted by inquiry in line with the standards and norms that consistently fail to include tools for deciding which of a number of wildly different alternative answers is the correct one. A promising alternative account of metaphysics’ aim is the *equilibrant account*, which the rest of this paper focuses on.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. The Equilibrant Aim

A recent proponent of this alternative is Helen Beebe (2018). Drawing on methodological remarks by David Lewis, she proposes that we give up the standard view and instead see the aim of metaphysics as the endeavour to “find out what equilibria there are that can withstand examination” (Beebe, 2018, p. 16; Lewis, 1983b, p. x).<sup>7</sup> That is, the aim of metaphysical inquiry is not to produce theories that make available knowledge of whether Humean supervenience is true, under what conditions some parts compose a whole, or what the nature of property instantiation really is, but to chart the plurality of tenable answers to these questions. Gideon Rosen (2020) sketches a similar position which he calls fictionalism about metaphysics. For a fictionalist (or “agnostic”, to use Rosen’s alternative term), metaphysical inquiry is not a search for metaphysical truths but an “exercise in model-building” with the aim of constructing theories that meet certain constraints (2020, p. 41). There is, as far as success of the discipline is concerned, no need to settle on one theory but “the valuable intellectual work is done when the ‘menu of well-worked-out

---

<sup>6</sup> A common move is to argue that philosophers may still, in the face of systematic disagreement, be rational in believing their philosophical theories to be true (Kelly, 2016; King, 2012; Rotondo, 2015) or else in holding some other belief-like propositional attitude towards their preferred theories (Barnett, 2019; Goldberg, 2013). This may or may not amount to a change in the view of philosophy’s aim, as a discipline. As Beebe (2018) points out, even if individual rational beliefs/attitudes can be salvaged, and some of these turn out to be true, that does little to save epistemic face for metaphysics as a collective discipline given the standard view. This is not to deny that such states have epistemic value – as I said, metaphysics may fail to promote the central epistemic aim of the discipline while still producing epistemic goods.

<sup>7</sup> Beebe’s thesis is put in terms of philosophy more generally rather than metaphysics specifically, but her motivation for reconceiving for philosophy’s aim draws heavily on considerations about methodology in metaphysics.

theories is before us” (p. 44). The constraints in question that theories should meet are captured by what Rosen calls ‘acceptability’. Acceptability in metaphysics consists in being “consistent with what we know in other areas” and satisfying certain other constraints that the discipline places on theories such as being “explicit, intelligible to us, explanatorily powerful, relatively complete, and plausible by our lights” (pp. 41-42).

I assume that Beebe and Rosen are describing basically the same view here: the aim of metaphysics is to map the space of tenable positions with respect to metaphysical questions, where tenability is understood as being internally coherent, exhibiting various explanatory virtues to a satisfactory degree, and fitting consistently with what we take ourselves to know. I will refer to its conception of metaphysics aim as “the equilibrism aim” in what follows (in line with Beebe’s label “equilibrism”). The equilibrism aim seems promising given the objective to accommodate both Unresolved Dispute and Successful Metaphysics. That’s because it effectively removes the conflict between the two: to have a plurality of competing accounts of the same phenomenon is just what we are aiming for (indeed, the more the better insofar as we want to map the complete space of constrained possibility), so Unresolved Dispute turns out to be *an important, central part of Successful Metaphysics*.

Nevertheless, the equilibrism proposal needs to be further developed. In particular, equilibrists need to address what I will refer to as the Value Question. The Value Question asks of any proposed epistemic aim for metaphysics as a discipline: what is the epistemic value of achieving or approximating that aim? On the one hand, the Value Question is interested exclusively in the *epistemic* value of metaphysics, and this is independent of whether it has or lacks other types of value (e.g. aesthetic, practical, moral).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the Value Question is not interested in *any* epistemic value of metaphysics but only in the epistemic value it has in virtue of, or insofar as it, promotes or approximates its aim as a discipline. As already noted above, metaphysical inquiry may have epistemic value – for instance by resulting in some individuals acquiring rational beliefs or becoming better at logical thinking, or by being a type of process that has intrinsic epistemic value<sup>9</sup> – while being in bad epistemic shape, i.e. while consistently failing to promote or approximate its aim. The Value Question is a question about the specifically *epistemic* value of *successful* metaphysics (as defined in terms of its central aim).

As noted, the Value Question can be posed to any view of metaphysics’ aim. But with the standard view, it is easier to see what the answer will be: knowledge is a paradigmatic example of

---

<sup>8</sup> McSweeney (forthcoming) also considers what she calls the Value Question for metaphysics, but it is less obvious whether she has in mind epistemic value specifically. Likewise for Rosen’s (2020) discussion of value.

<sup>9</sup> For a proposal along the latter lines, see (Sjölin Wirling, forthcoming).

something epistemically valuable.<sup>10</sup> With respect to the equilibrant aim, the question is what epistemic good(s) we are securing when we are managing to map the epistemically possible accounts of e.g. causation or property instantiation. This is much less obvious.

I will spend the rest of this paper outlining a proposal according to which successful equilibrant metaphysics is valuable because it creates *resources for non-factive understanding of metaphysics' subject matter*, and such non-factive understanding is epistemically valuable.

#### 4. Metaphysics as Epistemic How-Possibly Explanation

Let me start with what might seem like a detour through the philosophy of science. A scientific practice known in the philosophical literature as *how-possibly explanation* (HPE) has lately attracted quite a bit of attention from philosophers. Scientists in a wide variety of fields engage in something like providing explanations – typically using scientific models – that are not understood as *actual* (i.e. true) explanations of the relevant phenomena, but as *possible* explanations. There is no consensus on how this practice is best analysed (see Verreault-Julien, 2019 for a useful overview), but arguably in many (but not all) of these cases the relevant possibilities are supposed to be *epistemic* – that is, they are supposed to be explanations of actual phenomena that might be actual as far as current scientific knowledge is concerned (Bokulich, 2014; Brandon, 1990, p. 179; Salmon, 1989, p. 137; Sjölin Wirling & Grüne-Yanoff, forthcoming).

A good example is Alisa Bokulich's (2014) analysis of how scientists approach the phenomenon of tiger bush. Tiger bush is the phenomenon where vegetation in semi-arid areas grow in stripes, separated by barren areas, forming a pattern reminiscent of that in the tiger's fur. Scientists do not know exactly what causes this self-organizing pattern formation. Thus, in their research they construct models – Turing models, kernel models, differential flow models – that all support possible explanations of tiger bush, in the sense that they are all compatible with current scientific knowledge, and none of them can be ruled out as *not* the actual explanation.

In short, constructing and charting epistemically possible explanations is considered a legitimate and epistemically valuable research activity in sciences like biology, physics, economics, and so on. We now come to the reason for this detour: I suggest that we should understand equilibrant metaphysics as the constructing and charting of epistemic possibilities too.<sup>11</sup>

This is to an extent already present with Rosen's characterisation of what it takes for a metaphysical model to be acceptable: it must be “consistent with what we know in other areas”.

---

<sup>10</sup> It is then a separate question whether metaphysical inquiry can deliver knowledge, of course.

<sup>11</sup> This analogy with HPE-modelling is one way to elucidate the claim that metaphysics is usefully seen as *modelling*, which has been explored in rather different ways by Godfrey-Smith (2006) and Paul (2012). The proposal I offer has most in common with Godfrey-Smith's route, but is different in my explicit appeal to *epistemic* possibility, and in how I elucidate the epistemic goods – the understanding – afforded by the how-possibly “modelling” below.



The idea that successful metaphysical inquiry teaches us about epistemic possibilities is also floated by Michaela McSweeney (forthcoming). She considers a proposal according to which “we are never really justified in believing any particular metaphysical thesis but (...) we still learn things about the world (...) for example, that the world might be like  $p$ , for some  $p$ ”, and that one important function of argumentation in metaphysics is to remove obstacles to seeing that a particular view “might be true”, i.e. is consistent with other things we take to be true.

I say “a kind” of epistemic possibility because, while being epistemically possible roughly amounts to be compatible with what we know, there are several ways in which epistemic possibility can be defined. The truth-value of a claim of the form “ $p$  is epistemically possible” depends on how a number of moving parts are fixed: whose knowledge and at what time, what does it take to count as part of the relevant knowledge corpus, and what does it take for  $p$  to be “compatible” (Sjölin Wirling & Grüne-Yanoff, forthcoming). These moving parts can be fixed in different ways to generate different notions of epistemic possibility, and different ones are likely useful in different contexts.

Engineering a concept of epistemic possibility that is useful to metaphysical inquiry is far beyond the scope of this paper. But I will offer three preliminary thoughts on what it might look like, drawing on other metaphysicians’ remarks about methodology. First, regarding the relevant corpus – the “what we know in other areas”: this will arguably include knowledge of how the world undoubtedly appear to us through experience. Such knowledge has often been said to constrain metaphysical theorising, by providing the “data” that all theories must account for, both in the sense that it *prompts* metaphysical inquiry and that the resulting theories must face its tribunal when their viability is to be determined.<sup>12</sup> Whitehead’s description of metaphysical theorising using the metaphor of an airplane which start and lands on “the ground of empirical generalisation” after having taken a “flight in the thin air of imaginative generalisation” in *Process and Reality* (1929, p. 5) is a nice example of this.<sup>13</sup> Another example is Armstrong’s talk of “Moorean facts”:

the fact of sameness of type is a Moorean fact: one of the many facts which even philosophers should not deny, whatever philosophical account or analysis they give of such facts. Any comprehensive philosophy must try to give some account of Moorean facts. They constitute the compulsory questions in the philosophical examination paper (1980, p. 442).

---

<sup>12</sup> For a nuanced critical discussion of the Moorean approach, see (Rinard, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> See Simons (1998) and Maurin (2002, chapter 3) for clarifying summaries of Whitehead’s methodological stance.

In addition to the Moorean facts of common sense, the claims of a viable metaphysical theories plausibly need to be compatible with well-established scientific knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Second, the relevant sense of “not ruled out by” or “compatible with” will need to be fairly liberal, i.e. many different metaphysical accounts will be compatible with what we know. This is suggested by the fact that wildly different theories of the same thing are considered viable, but a nice way to further highlight it is to consider Lewis’s poignant observation in response to Armstrong’s complaint that Ostrich nominalism fails to account for sameness of type:

Not every account is an analysis! A system that takes certain Moorean facts as primitive, as unanalysed, cannot be accused of failing to make a place for them. It neither shirks the compulsory question nor answers it by denial. It does give an account (1983a, p. 352).

In fact, the validity of Lewis’ response to Armstrong is strengthened when we view it through the lens of epistemic possibility: saying that  $x$  is primitive is in no way ruled out by knowledge that  $x$ . Finally, not only “what we know in other areas” constrain metaphysical inquiry though, but also various principles or explanatory virtues such as coherence, simplicity, intelligibility, explanatory power, parsimony. It is an open question whether we should build these principles into the notion of epistemic possibility – so that arguments that seek to show that a particular theory is e.g. parsimonious, are understood as seeking to establish that the theory is epistemically possible in the relevant sense – or whether they should be seen as constraining the subset of epistemic possibility that we are interested in. Either approach could, in principle, be workable. It is not exactly clear what notion of epistemic possibility is relevant to epistemic HPE in science – there might well be several, suitable for different cases. I am not aware of any systematic inquiry into this issue, but it would not be surprising if this notion too was somehow constrained not only by compatibility with established scientific findings but also with various explanatory virtues generally taken to further scientific understanding.

## 5. Understanding with epistemic possibilities

---

<sup>14</sup> Partly because of considerations discussed in the next paragraph, this need not amount to what Daly and Liggins (2011) call deferentialism, i.e. “the view that philosophy should uncritically ‘rubber stamp’ every scientific claim” (p. 334). Philosophers need not (should not!) uncritically accept everything scientists claim to currently know, not least because (as Daly and Liggins point out) different scientific disciplines may claim inconsistent things – it is thus a delicate question what counts as a well-established scientific finding. It is also an interesting question whether the stance taken here requires scientific realism, but it is not my intention that it should. The hope is that the ‘scientific knowledge’ can amount merely to knowledge of e.g. what the evidence is and suggests. More generally, these issues turn on how the second moving part of the epistemic possibility concept is fixed.

Now, how does viewing metaphysics as the construction and charting of epistemic how-possibly explanations of metaphysically interesting phenomena help with the Value Question? Well, thinking about the value of epistemic HPEs in science might guide us in finding out what the value of the (arguably) similar activity of metaphysics is.

Granted, this may at first seem like a dead end, because it is clear that the perhaps most *obvious* epistemic value that attaches to epistemic HPEs in science is *instrumental* to the acquisition of knowledge of what the actual explanation is. That is, knowing what the epistemically possible explanations are can, in various ways, help guiding research that will lead to knowledge of what the actual explanation is. In the tiger bush example, the idea is that with the accumulation of more empirical evidence, some of the earlier epistemic HPEs will no longer be such, i.e. scientists will rule out this or that mechanism as *not* in fact responsible for producing the phenomenon. The search for the explanation of tiger bush has, in fact, managed to cull some explanations previously considered to be possible, which no longer count as how-possibly explanation (Bokulich, 2014, pp. 331-333). Another illustration of this is Massimi's (2019) analysis of HPE modelling in particle physics. In order to fill a gap in the Standard Model, particle physicists have theorised entities referred to as super-symmetrical (SUSY) particles, but they have not been able to empirically confirm that any SUSYs actually exist. To put things very simply, scientists advance research in this area by modelling different ways in which the SUSY particle could be if it existed, given what they know. The array of possibilities is then used to guide empirical testing, where particle accelerators are used in attempts to *rule out* some of these possibilities as non-actual.<sup>15</sup>

But this clearly cannot be what is going with metaphysics, on the equilibrist picture. As was highlighted in the outline of Unresolved Dispute – which is part of what motivates equilibrism – the tools of metaphysical inquiry cannot adjudicate in a truth-conducive way between alternatives, and so there is no next step of metaphysics in which we might use the menu of possible alternatives in deciding on the true answer. Nor is it plausible that some other discipline will be able to take this map of possibilities prepared by metaphysics and go on to (empirically or otherwise) cull some of them on the road to the one true account.

However, it is arguably not always the case that the prospects of using the menu of possible explanations in the search for the *actual* explanation, are particularly good. This may be the case for a number of historical facts, for instance. Is epistemic HPE not epistemically valuable in cases where there is no prospect of being able to use it to find the actual explanation? I submit that

---

<sup>15</sup> Not all instance of how-possibly explanation fits this pattern: in some cases the concern is to acquire possibility knowledge. But as I have argued elsewhere (Sjölin Wirling & Grüne-Yanoff, forthcoming), what is characteristic of such practices is that it targets *objective* (and often (known to be) counterfactual) rather than epistemic possibility. Practices of *epistemic* how-possibly explanation tend to behave like the practices described by Bokulich and Massimi.

to be implausible. Theorising about the possible causes of e.g. the fall of Rome or the possible skin colour of dinosaurs is epistemically valuable, even if we have little reason to think that disputes over these matters will be finally resolved, and even if we were to recognise that we will never know the actual answer.<sup>16</sup> So there must be some value to these practices that is independent of their (perhaps more immediately evident) instrumental epistemic value, which they can have *whether or not* they lead to knowledge of actual explanations.

I will suggest that this value lies in the *understanding* afforded by ranges of epistemic how-possibly explanations. In particular, the idea is that our epistemic position with respect to a phenomenon is aided by access to and grasp of multiple, perhaps partly overlapping but also in central respects partly conflicting, perspectives on that phenomenon. I think the state that this improved epistemic position is a form of understanding. But before I go on to outline more precisely what I take the relevant form of understanding to consist in, I want to consider yet another activity that bears resemblance to epistemic how-possibly explanation in science, and equilibrium metaphysics, which according to Catherine Elgin is epistemically valuable exactly because it increases understanding: academic art interpretation.

Elgin (2017) describes in detail a case where scholars present and defend different interpretations of Cézanne's *Le Compotier*. For instance, is the key to this painting the way Cézanne constitutes mass out of colour, or the way he emphasizes the flatness of the picture plane? (2017, pp. 174-178). This dispute, between highly skilled scholars consists in sophisticated reason-giving: they present arguments in favour of their respective interpretation, comparing it favourably to competing accounts, and so on. The debate is constrained by epistemic norms and standards that all parts are under the obligation to heed, it is not the case that *any* interpretation is viable, and scholars are required to lay out their case for their preferred interpretation in a particular way, putative reasons must be accepted as such by all parties (even if the reasons fail to convince the opposition), and so on.

This is just how we would expect a debate over a factual matter to go. But in a paradigmatic factual dispute, the function of arguing, of giving reasons that are supposed to weigh with the other party and/or a neutral audience, is to settle which side of the dispute is giving the true description of the fact in question. Yet, the dispute between interpretations of a painting seems irresolvable in a deep sense. It is not only that we cannot expect it to be resolved, we do not even in principle see what it would take to solve it – the idea of a conclusive reason that would settle the debate makes little sense. This is contrast to factual disputes, even those that are *in practice* irresolvable. For instance, palaeontologists disagree over the skin colour of the dinosaurs, and there

---

<sup>16</sup> Elgin makes a similar point about disputes like that over whether Neanderthals buried their dead (2017, p. 181).

is perhaps little reason to think that evidence which will conclusively settle the issue is forthcoming. But palaeontologists nevertheless will have no problem agreeing on what type of evidence *would* in principle settle the issue. The dispute over how Cézanne's painting is to be interpreted is different in that regard. So what is the point of sophisticated reason-giving in the case of art interpretation?

According to Elgin, some inquiries don't have the function of helping us find out and settle on the truth. Some disputes, including those like the Cézanne case, instead have epistemic value in virtue of its increasing our understanding. Here, arguments are like invitations to consider the perspective in question, to see the object through a particular lens. And within the course of inquiry in these fields, as part of this continuous competition between multiple interpretations where publicly available and assessable reasons in support of the various interpretations are put forward, scrutinised, refined, and so on, interconnection between the arguments, reasons and assumptions that make up the interpretation become visible. Their force (or sometimes, relative lack thereof) and relation to the object of inquiry come to be better appreciated by all parts to the dispute.

The idea, I take it, is that to see these various interconnections and relations and perspectives is to understand, to some significant degree, the object that all these perspectives are perspectives on: in this case the artwork, a particular painting. Because note that while different interpretations will highlight different features and display their significance whereas other features will be downplayed, all interpretations are constrained by the object of understanding, the painting. There is this one thing that all parties have access to, and some common knowledge about it, from which the inquiry proceeds, and which also constrains inquiry. For sure, what we know about the object may allow for very different and to some extent contradictory interpretations, as there might be both many things we don't know and many ways to accommodate that which we do know. But it is not that a viable interpretations can "float free" of the available facts. We can, although Elgin does not put it this way, extrapolate from this idea to the claim that viable interpretations need to be *epistemically possible* interpretations of the painting.<sup>17</sup>

What I am trying to convey here is that art interpretation in an important is sense similar to epistemic HPE in science, and to metaphysics: in all three cases there is something – some phenomenon that interests the art scholars, or philosophers, or scientists – that is the target of inquiry. This something is an important part of what constrains inquiry: not anything goes. In some

---

<sup>17</sup> Elgin also stresses that interpretations can be untenable despite not conflicting with what we know about the painting, for instance by being "uninformative or unenlightening", as would be the interpretation according to which *Le Compotier* is simply a picture of a bowl of fruit. Of course, this is true for how-possibly explanation and for metaphysical theories too: there are certain *explanatory virtues* that an account needs to fulfil. Again, this may or may not be built into the notion of epistemic possibility.

cases we know more about the phenomenon, in some cases less, and that determines how many and how different the viable interpretations or accounts or explanations will be. But whatever the size and nature of the set of epistemically privileged propositions is, it constrains what counts as a viable account: it must be epistemically possible in the relevant sense. The art interpretation case shows us what the epistemic value of epistemic how-possibly explanation is – in absence of, or in addition to, its instrumental epistemic value: understanding. And it is not clear why it should matter whether the absence of instrumental epistemic value is *principled* (as it perhaps is in art) or just *in practice*: in science, or philosophy, where the disputes may not be irresolvable in the same deep sense, there can still be epistemic value in the form of increased understanding – in addition to or in place of any instrumental epistemic value. What is distinctive about metaphysics, and perhaps about a lot of other philosophy too, is that more or less *all* central questions are like this, and so non-factive objective understanding is the *main* epistemic good that metaphysical research brings about.

I anticipate that someone might now object that in the art interpretation case – and perhaps also in most epistemic HPEs in science – there is clearly an *existing object*, to which the interpretations pertain. But several metaphysical disputes concern exactly whether there *does* exist something (e.g. properties, persisting objects), and it would be bad news if views like nominalism or stage theory could in principle not contribute to our understanding in the relevant sense. I think this worry can be mitigated if we take the notion of “objects of inquiry” less literally, i.e. as not necessarily pointing to an *object* which metaphysics inquires into. I take the “objects” of metaphysical inquiry to be more like *phenomena* – observable events – of scientific inquiry, which does not assume anything about the causes of the event. Property nominalism and universal realism then, can both (in principle) contribute to the understanding of *the phenomenon* of e.g. property instantiation. I note, however that the question of just how we are to pick out the *explananda* for metaphysical theories is a non-trivial question that a full-blown version of this kind of equilibrium would need to address.

### **5.1. Non-factive objectual understanding**

I am going to end this paper by outlining in some more detail the kind of understanding that I have suggested metaphysics (and art interpretation, and epistemic how-possibly explanation in science) is well placed to bring about, given the equilibrium picture of metaphysics. I call this state non-factive objectual understanding.

Philosophers do not agree on what understanding is, and I cannot go through all the different accounts here (see Hannon, 2021 for a recent overview). What I will present here does not fully

line up with any account currently on the market, but it has affinities with several of them. In any case, most people seem to agree that there are several different kinds of understanding (e.g. understanding *that*, understanding *why*, understanding a subject matter, understanding a language...), and I am happy to embrace such pluralism. All I need for the purposes of this paper is that there is an epistemic state with roughly the characteristics I outline below, and that this state is of epistemic value. Hopefully some accurate uses of ‘understanding’ capture something like that state, but at the end of the day, terminology is not particularly important to me.

First, the type of understanding which equilibrist metaphysics promotes is *objectual*. The term ‘objectual understanding’ is due to Kvanvig (2003), and denotes understanding of a subject matter, such as when one understands the periodic table, the Comanche dominance of the southern plains of North America between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, current foreign policy in Russia, Freud’s theory of the unconscious, moral responsibility, or the nature of causation. Clearly, the objects of understanding can be anything from theories (including false ones) to actual phenomena. An epistemic subject S understands subject matter X insofar as S *grasps* a reasonably comprehensive amount of information about X. In particular, most authors will agree that understanding X requires grasping *connections* or *relations* between pieces of information pertaining to X. These can be e.g. explanatory, probabilistic, or logical relations, of coherence, of relative importance.

My claim is that the objects of understanding are not philosophical *theories* (or, in the case of science, some explanatory story; or in art, some interpretation). Instead, the objects of understanding are the phenomena we normally think of metaphysics as investigating, e.g. properties rather than *theories* of properties (in science, they are the phenomena in the world, in art, the artwork). But the theories are *vehicles of understanding* (Greco 2014, p. 293) in the sense that they are what we grasp, and it is via grasping them that we get understanding of the phenomena that are the objects of understanding. I differ here from McSweeney (forthcoming), who has recently also proposed that metaphysics is primarily aimed at understanding, which is epistemically valuable. But the objects of understanding she has in mind appears to be *metaphysical theories*. That is, good metaphysical inquiry helps metaphysicians understand their own, and competing theories, better. I have no quarrel at all with that claim, but I do not think this is the main source of epistemic value for the equilibrist aim. Objectual understanding *of theories* may be instrumentally epistemically valuable, e.g. in the tiger bush case, good understanding of the various how-possibly *models* might be very important in guiding search for the actual explanation. And similarly, understanding of metaphysical theories may be an important precondition for the objectual understanding I have in mind, but this latter understanding – from which I think the instrumental value of the equilibrist aim flows – does not have theories as its objects.

Second, as most other forms of understanding I take the kind relevant here to psychologically involve *grasping* a set of propositions. Grasping is often said to involve a “*seeing*” of how things fit together, that bring with it a form of *cognitive command or control*, characterised by giving the subject who has the grasp a number of abilities to “do” things with, or “manipulate” the information in question in various ways, such as reason with and within the body of information, apply explanations to novel cases, draw novel inferences, and so on. Importantly however, in my view grasping does *not* involve belief: you can grasp a set of propositions in the relevant sense without believing them to be true. Here the kind of objectual understanding I have in mind differs from Kvanvig’s. Why? Because the understanding I have in mind typically involves grasping the information provided by more than one theory of the same subject matter, and these sets of information will typically contradict each other. Successful metaphysics makes available these sets of jointly epistemically possible propositions, sets that are mutually incompatible. The idea is that grasping the information provided by this plurality of theories about, say, causation, is a way of increasing one’s understanding of causation. So it won’t work to require that a subject who grasps a plurality of mutually inconsistent theories about causation needs to believe the information that she grasps. For others who deny that understanding requires belief, e.g. Dellsén (2017) and Elgin (2017).

For similar reasons, , the objectual understanding that equilibrist philosophy – or more generally, epistemic how-possibly explanation – produces the resources for is *non-factive*. That is, it is not required – in contrast to how e.g. Kvanvig describes objectual understanding – that the “central propositions” in the grasped amount of information be true. That is, the central propositions in the set, about e.g. causation, need not be true for there to be understanding of causation. Giving up on factivity will seem radical to some, and some will suspect that it is *ad hoc*. But other theorists of understanding reject factivity too, including Elgin (2007), Riggs (2009), and Potochnik (2020), for reasons that do not have anything to do with the epistemic quality of metaphysics. So there is room, and even demand, for understanding-like, epistemically valuable cognitive states that are non-factive.<sup>18</sup> Note also that factivity isn’t given up just to save the idea that *metaphysics* is supposed to deliver understanding. I am trying to capture a state which can explain the epistemic value of not just metaphysics on the equilibrist picture, but also other activities that seem epistemically valuable, even in the absence of instrumental value to knowledge of what the actual answer is, –including scientific HPE and art interpretation.

---

<sup>18</sup> My use of “non-factive” is meant to mark distance from what is normally meant by “factive” understanding. That said, the type of understanding of interest here could in principle be called factive in the sense that it needs to be true that the (sets of) propositions grasped are epistemically possible in the relevant sense.



In sum then, S has non-factive objectual understanding of, say, causation, when S grasps – can represent and has cognitive control over – a set of epistemically possible comprehensive subsets of propositions about causation (i.e. philosophical accounts or theories), and the relations (both inside a subset and between subsets) between these propositions. S is not required to believe any of these propositions, and it is not required that the central propositions in any of these grasped subsets are true. The main idea is that our epistemic position with respect to a phenomenon is aided by this kind of access to and grasp of multiple, perhaps partly overlapping but also in central respects partly conflicting, perspectives on that phenomenon. I think it's aptly called understanding, but I'm not much into fighting for the term. *Something* like this idea is present also in the work of others, including some of those cited above, such as Elgin and Potochnik. It is not easy to pin down exactly how and in what sense this grasp of multiple competing perspectives on the same phenomenon, 'informs us' about or improves our epistemic position with respect to the phenomenon in question, since we do not in any straight-forward way learn new truths about what it is like. But maybe one way to put it is that it improves our grasp of that which we *do* know; what that does and does not imply – e.g. by highlighting the different aspects of the phenomenon as we know it; by illuminating and emphasizing how these features sometimes pull in different directions; by exploring all the things that are compatible with what we know and thereby helping us see what we do *not* know, or what we cannot rule out. Whether or not this is aptly called 'understanding', I think a good case can be made that this is epistemically valuable.

All of the above is obviously compatible with it being *more* epistemically valuable to have e.g. knowledge or factive understanding in domains where there are matters of fact to discover. Having knowledge or factive understanding of e.g. causation in the form of grasping the one correct comprehensive theory of causation, and being able to rule the competing ones out, may well be more valuable and desirable from an epistemic point of view than the non-factive understanding which metaphysics can give us. But the running assumption here is that we don't and won't have that – what we are concerned with is accounting for the epistemic value of that which we (when things go well) *can* achieve given equilibrium. It is my view that contributing to resources for non-factive understanding accounts for the lion's share of the epistemic value of metaphysics' equilibrium aim and the processes and practices that, when things go well, help approximate it.

## 5. Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper was to further develop and supplement the "equilibrium" view that the epistemic aim of metaphysics is to find out what viable alternative theories there are with

respect to metaphysical questions. In particular, I argued that equilibrism faces what I called the Value Question: the challenge to explain the alleged epistemic value of this equilibrist aim and inquiry that promote it. First, I proposed to understand this aim in terms of *epistemic possibility*, drawing on an analogy with epistemic how-possibly explanation in science. Second, I argued that metaphysics thus conceived – and activities with a similar structure that constructs and charts multiple, perhaps partly overlapping but also in central respects partly conflicting, perspectives on, or explanations of, one and the same phenomenon – provides resources for a non-factive understanding of the objects of (in this case, metaphysical) inquiry. Such non-factive objectual understanding is arguably of epistemic value, not just in metaphysics, but also in other fields where there are irresolvable (whether in principle or practice) disputes, and this includes art interpretation as well as science.<sup>19</sup>

## References

- Armstrong, D. M. (1980). Against 'Ostrich' Nominalism: A Reply to Michael Devitt. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 61, 440-449.
- Armstrong, D. M. (2010). *Sketch for a Systematic Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Barnett, Z. (2019). Philosophy Without Belief. *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Philosophy*, 128, 109-138.
- Beebe, H. (2018). Philosophical Scepticism and the Aims of Philosophy. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 118(1), 1-24.
- Bokulich, A. (2014). How the Tiger Bush Got Its Stripes: 'How Possibly' vs. 'How Actually' Model Explanations. *The Monist*, 97(3), 321-338.
- Brandon, R. N. (1990). *Adaptation and Environment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brennan, J. (2010). Scepticism About Philosophy. *Ratio*, 23, 1-16.
- Cappelen, H. (2017). Disagreement in Philosophy: An Optimistic Perspective. In G. D'Oro & S. Overgaard (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology*: Cambridge University Press.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2015). Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy? *Philosophy*, 90(1), 3-31.
- Daly, C., & Liggins, D. (2011). Differentialism. *Philosophical Studies*, 156(3), 321-337.
- Dellsén, F. (2017). Understanding without Justification or Belief. *Ratio*, 30(3), 239-254.
- Dellsén, F., Lawler, I., & Norton, J. (forthcoming). Thinking About Progress: From Science To Philosophy. *Noûs*.
- Elgin, C. Z. (2007). Understanding and the facts. *Philosophical Studies*, 132(1), 33 - 42.

---

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Helen Beebe, David Liggins, Frans Svensson, participants in the research seminar in theoretical philosophy at the University of Gothenburg, and an anonymous reviewer of this journal for helpful comments on this paper. My research was generously funded by the Swedish Research Council grant no. 2019-00635.

- Elgin, C. Z. (2017). *True Enough*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Frances, B. (2017). Extensive Philosophical Agreement and Progress. *Metaphilosophy*, 48(1-2), 47-57.
- Fumerton, R. (2010). You Can't Trust a Philosopher. In R. Feldman & T. A. Warfield (Eds.), *Disagreement* (pp. 91-110). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Godfrey-Smith, P. (2006). Theories and Models in Metaphysics. *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 14(1), 4-19.
- Goldberg, S. C. (2009). Reliabilism in philosophy. *Philosophical Studies*, 142(1), 105 - 117.
- Goldberg, S. C. (2013). Defending Philosophy in the Face of Systematic Disagreement. In D. E. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and Skepticism* (pp. 277-294). New York: Routledge.
- Greco, J. (2014). Episteme: Knowledge and Understanding. In K. Timpe & C. Boyd (Eds.) *Virtues and the Vices* (pp. 285-301). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hannon, M. (2021). Recent Work in the Epistemology of Understanding. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 58(3), 269-290.
- Keller, J. A. (2017). Philosophical Individualism. In J. A. Keller (Ed.), *Being, Freedom, and Method: Themes From the Philosophy of Peter van Inwagen*. Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, T. (2016). Disagreement in Philosophy: Its Epistemic Significance. In H. Cappelen, T. S. Gendler, & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology* (pp. 374-394). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- King, N. L. (2012). Disagreement: What's the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 85(2), 249-272.
- Kornblith, H. (2013). Is Philosophical Knowledge Possible? In D. E. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and Skepticism* (pp. 260-276). New York: Routledge.
- Kriegel, U. (2013). The Epistemological Challenge of Revisionary Metaphysics. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 13.
- Kvanvig, J. L. (2003). *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Vol. 113). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, D. (1983a). New work for a theory of universals. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61(December), 343-377.
- Lewis, D. (1983b). *Philosophical Papers Vol. I*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lowe, E. J. (1998). *The Possibility of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Massimi, M. (2019). Two kinds of exploratory models. *Philosophy of Science*, 86(5), 869-881.
- Maurin, A.-S. (2002). *If Tropes*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- McSweeney, M. M. (forthcoming). Metaphysics as Essentially Imaginative and Aiming at Understanding. *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

- Nado, J. (2019). Who Wants to Know? In T. S. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (Vol. 6, pp. 114-136).
- Paul, L. A. (2012). Metaphysics as modeling: the handmaiden's tale. *Philosophical Studies*, 160(1), 1-29.
- Potochnik, A. (2020). Idealization and Many Aims. *Philosophy of Science*, 87(5), 933-943.
- Riggs, W. (2009). Understanding, Knowledge, and the Meno Requirement. In A. Haddock, A. Millar, & D. Pritchard (Eds.), *Epistemic Value* (pp. 331-338). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rinard, S. (2013). Why Philosophy Can Overturn Common Sense. In T. S. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology Volume 4* (pp. 185-213) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rosen, G. (2020). Metaphysics as a Fiction. In B. Armour-Garb & F. Kroon (Eds.), *Fictionalism in Philosophy* (pp. 28–47). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rotondo, A. (2015). Disagreement and Intellectual Scepticism. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93(2), 251-271.
- Salmon, W. C. (1989). Four Decades of Scientific Explanation. In P. Kitcher & W. C. Salmon (Eds.), *Scientific Explanation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Simons, P. (1998). Metaphysical Systematics: A Lesson from Whitehead. *Erkenntnis*, 48(2-3), 377-393.
- Sjölin Wirling, Y. (forthcoming). Non-uniformism and the Epistemology of Philosophically Interesting Modal Claims. *Grazer Philosophische Studien*.
- Sjölin Wirling, Y., & Grüne-Yanoff, T. (forthcoming). Epistemic and Objective Possibility in Science. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*.
- Stoljar, D. (2017). *Philosophical Progress*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Verreault-Julien, P. (2019). How could models possibly provide how-possibly explanations? *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 73, 22-33.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* New York: Macmillan.