

Fundamental ontology and esoteric metaphysics: how to settle the question

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Abstract

How can we settle whether or not key metaphysical questions should properly be stated by relying on a substantial notion of metaphysical priority, like *grounding* or *being metaphysically more fundamental than*? Relatedly, how can we settle whether ontology should properly be seen as the discipline that studies either what there is or else only what there is fundamentally? Which way of thinking about ontology brings out its proper metaphysical significance? One challenge to giving notions like grounding or fundamentality key roles in metaphysics is that these notions are insufficiently clear and that metaphysics tied to them turns into esoteric metaphysics. To make progress on these issues I propose a particular challenge — the cognitive function challenge — that needs to be met for metaphysics based on a substantial notion of priority not to turn into objectionable esoteric metaphysics. I also outline some reasons why other approaches that aim to establish such notions as legitimate for metaphysics fall short and how the cognitive function challenge might be met.

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1 The question of ontology and the project of metaphysics

‘Ontology’ is a technical philosophical term, and as such there is little point in worrying about what ontology is supposed to do more precisely. As a technical term it can be specified in one way or the other, and each one is fine by itself. But there is a real question in the neighborhood, one that points to a key difference in how one thinks of metaphysics and of philosophy, and how both of them relate to other parts of inquiry. To get to that question it is best to start thinking about metaphysics first, and of ontology second as a key part of metaphysics. Metaphysics, as a first approximation, tries to find out what reality is like in the most general and most significant ways. Ontology is the part of metaphysics that tries to contribute to metaphysics by investigating, in another first approximation, what there is, what the things or stuff is that makes up the world, what the building blocks of reality are, or something similar. The rest of metaphysics tries to find out how these building blocks fit together in the most general way. That is only a first approximation, naturally, and a rather metaphorical one at that, but it already gives rise to the question why we should think of either metaphysics or ontology as parts of philosophy. Doesn’t every part of inquiry try to find out what reality is like and what there is, and don’t these parts not only concern particular facts, but also general features of reality? How is any of this philosophy and not just science, or worse, a bad version of science? One, but only one, response to this challenge is to invoke notions like ‘metaphysical fundamentality’ or ‘grounding’ in marking a separation between metaphysics as part of philosophy and other parts of inquiry. But a worry about this move is that it is unclear if these notions make sufficient sense to carry this weight, and that metaphysics based on such notions turns into an objectionable form of metaphysics: esoteric metaphysics. This paper is about this problem. After setting up the issue more precisely and in more detail, as well as what the alleged problem is supposed to be, I will propose a method for resolving it. I won’t be able to properly resolve the issue in this paper, naturally, but I hope to defend a certain standard for what needs to be done to resolve it one way or the other. To the best of my knowledge, that standard has not been met yet, nor has it been shown that it can’t be met, so I take the issue to be open so far. But before prematurely jumping to the conclusion, let me properly set up the issue. I hope you will excuse the indulgence of setting it up in a way that I did before, particular in [Hofweber, 2009] and [Hofweber, 2016]. It is important to elaborate a bit on the setup to properly carve out what is ultimately at issue here. I don’t think the setup is particularly controversial, although how to answer the

various questions it leads to certainly is.

To set our issue up properly we need to think a bit more about metaphysics in general, and thus engage in “meta-metaphysics”. It is often seen with suspicion to wonder about metaphysics as a whole, and what it should do. Traditionally, reflections on metaphysics as a whole occurred within anti-metaphysical projects: think about metaphysics as a whole to see why the whole thing is a confused project. The pro-metaphysical sentiment is to just do metaphysics and stop worrying about how it can be done or what it is supposed to do more precisely. After all, who would ask the mathematicians the same, to get all worried about what mathematics as a whole is supposed to do or how it is possible? But there is also a pro-metaphysical justification for worrying about metaphysics as a whole, which does not carry over to mathematics and other cases. It is in a sense the opposite of the traditional anti-metaphysical worries about metaphysics, but at the same time it is also much more serious. The traditional anti-metaphysical worries tried to reject metaphysics, since it either can’t lead to knowledge or it is making meaningless assertions. But such claims are usually based on general theories of meaning and knowledge that we have good reason to reject, and which would also yield many other parts of inquiry meaningless or not leading to knowledge. The real problem with metaphysics is rather the opposite. The problem is that it seems that in many cases a question asked in metaphysics isn’t meaningless, nor is its answer unknowable. Instead it is a fully meaningful question, but the answer is long known. We seem to be asking questions that have well-established answers. This issue is most easily illustrated with the case of ontology, but it applies to other metaphysical problems just as well. To illustrate it with the example of ontology, consider the case of the ontology of mathematical objects. We wonder whether the spatiotemporal world is all there is, or whether there is something else, something which mathematics aims to describe just as the natural sciences aim to describe the spatiotemporal world. Whatever the answer, it will lead to very different conceptions of mathematics. The question we hope to answer thus seems to be the questions whether there is besides the spatiotemporal world also something else: mathematical objects. Or to put it more simply: are there mathematical objects? But this question, as stated, seems to have a well-known and trivial answer. Mathematics itself answers it in the affirmative. Its results include that there are infinitely many prime numbers, and thus infinitely many numbers. And what else could a mathematical object be than paradigmatically a number? Thus the answer to the metaphysical question is known, easily known, and it had nothing much to do with metaphysics. It was answered in mathematics instead.

Metaphysics worth the name can't find this situation acceptable. Metaphysics can't accept that a question it was trying to ask has an answer immediately implied by something that is proven in mathematics. It can't accept that one of the questions it considers open has an answer implied by the results of mathematics, and thus the openness of the question depends on that the results of mathematics themselves are in question. Metaphysics has to be modest enough to recognize that it can't pin its hopes on this mathematical result somehow being incorrect. But metaphysics also has to be ambitious enough to try to ask some open questions of fact. If metaphysics has any ambitions at all, it can't just try to ask questions whose answers are immediately implied by the results of mathematics or other similar parts of inquiry. And metaphysics can't think of itself as being the fact-checker of other parts of inquiry, since inquiry already is fact checking. To put some terminology on this issue, we can call the task of metaphysics whatever metaphysics is supposed to do. Almost everyone thinks that there is something to do for metaphysics, and even anti-metaphysical philosophers, who hold that metaphysics merely clarifies concepts or suggest new concepts to be used in the sciences, thereby think that there is something to do for metaphysics and thus that it has a task. But merely having something to do is not very ambitious. We can call ambitious metaphysics any approach to metaphysics that takes metaphysics to ask further questions of fact, not merely to investigate our concepts in which we represent facts. Finally, we can call ambitious, yet modest, metaphysics any approach to metaphysics that holds that metaphysics has some questions of fact to ask which are not immediately answered by the results of other parts of inquiry, in particular ones where we have good reason to think they get things right, like mathematics and the natural sciences. Ambitious, yet modest, metaphysics claims for itself that a) it concerns questions of fact, and b) it has some questions of fact to ask that are not immediately answered in other parts of inquiry. Ambitious, yet modest, metaphysics thus has a minimal form of autonomy: not absolute autonomy, in that it is completely independent of other domains, but still a form of autonomy in that other parts of inquiry don't immediately answer its questions. It needs to be contrasted with approaches to metaphysics that hold that metaphysics does not ask its own questions of fact, but merely repeats or generalizes answers established elsewhere. It can't just help out in inquiry by making new ways of describing the world available to those who answer questions of fact. To hold onto ambitious metaphysics is not thereby to reject holism in inquiry. It can well be that metaphysics draws on physics or linguistics or psychology in its attempts to answer its own questions. And other parts of inquiry might draw on metaphysics in a similar way. One does not have to hold that metaphysics is completely isolated from the rest of inquiry to hold that it should

be ambitious, yet modest, and that it has a minimal form of autonomy and its own questions of fact. But it can't be that metaphysics is asking whether there are numbers when that question is immediately answered in mathematics. At least not without saying more on how this is compatible with the ambition of metaphysics to have its own questions of fact to answer. Many philosophers do not have this ambition for metaphysics, but I do. Many philosophers that on the face of it seem to be pro-metaphysical also, on a closer look, also do not have this ambition for metaphysics. But if we do and we think that metaphysics should be ambitious, yet modest, then we have to wonder what these questions of fact are that metaphysics is supposed to answer. In other words, we need to know which questions are in the domain of metaphysics. This questions we can call

- (1) **The question of the domain:** which questions are to be answered in metaphysics?

This will be our primary concern in this paper. We can say that a question in the domain of metaphysics (partly) defines the domain of metaphysics, and that arguing that a particular question belongs in the domain of metaphysics is to defend a domain for metaphysics. Related to the question of the domain is its companion question of how these questions in the domain should be answered:

- (2) **The question of the method:** how is metaphysics supposed to answer the questions in its domain?

It is natural to try to answer the question of the domain first, and then to see how we can answer the questions which are in the domain of metaphysics. So, which questions are in the domain of metaphysics?

There is one main dividing line among those who want to defend a domain of metaphysics so understood. Both contrast with those who reject such a domain, or who aim to water it down by finding a crucial difference between the questions of metaphysics and other parts of inquiry that makes the metaphysical questions in some sense less fully factual or objective (in a sense to be clarified, of course). The two main approaches to defend a domain of metaphysics are the analyzers and the loaders. The analyzers hold that we did ask the questions we wanted to ask correctly, including, for example, to ask the ontological question about mathematical objects simply as 'are there mathematical objects?' However, the story continues, this question is not, on the way it is asked in metaphysics, answered in mathematics, nor is such an answer immediately implied by the results of mathematics. Once we look at what we do when we ask these questions in metaphysics and what we do when we apparently answer them in mathematics, we can see that these are sufficiently different things. The question, as

asked in metaphysics, is not in fact answered in mathematics. Once we look at the complexities involved in such speech acts, and once we properly analyze what we do when we ask and say such things, we can see that everything is fine for metaphysics. This is what I believe to be the correct way to defend a domain of metaphysics. In other work I have argued that questions like ‘are there numbers?’ have different readings, that these readings arise from different functions that quantifiers have in ordinary communication, and that by looking at the details of mathematical language as it is actually used we can see that the question asked in metaphysics is not answered in mathematics. It is simply left open by mathematics and available for metaphysics to claim as its own. The details of all this are a little involved, but they won’t matter for us now, and I won’t try to repeat them here, since we will in this paper focus on the other option: the loaders.¹ On the analyzer’s version of defending a domain for metaphysics briefly outlined, the question that we ask in metaphysics is just an ordinary question, expressed in everyday vocabulary. It involves no distinctly metaphysical terms, and the different readings of quantifiers are not tied to metaphysical vs. non-metaphysical readings. Instead the questions of metaphysics, for the case we looked at so far, are stated in terms of perfectly ordinary notions, notions that are employed elsewhere for ordinary purposes, completely independently of metaphysics. This will be relevant later.

Our main focus here will be a different attempt to defend a domain of metaphysics: to load the question itself with more metaphysical terms. On this way of doing things the question ‘are there numbers?’ was not the right question to ask. This question indeed is answered in mathematics, but the question we should have asked in metaphysics instead isn’t answered that way. That question should be stated in more metaphysical terms, not simply as ‘are there numbers?’ but as something like ‘are there really numbers?’, ‘are numbers part of reality?’, ‘are numbers real?’, ‘are numbers part of the fundamental building blocks of reality?’, ‘are numbers part of fundamental reality?’, or the like. Here the idea is that mathematics answers questions stated in ordinary or mathematical terms, but not ones stated in metaphysical terms. Metaphysics should thus think of itself as asking questions which themselves contain metaphysical terms. In other words: the questions in the domain of metaphysics are to be stated in terms that are distinctly metaphysical. And it is because of this that metaphysics can be ambitious. Mathematics, after all, only implies things about there being numbers and what numbers are like, but not anything about fundamental reality and what it contains. The proper meta-

¹My own positive view on all this is outlined in [Hofweber, 2009] and spelled out in detail in [Hofweber, 2016].

physical question, on this approach, is thus left open by the results of mathematics.

Loading the question to defend a domain of metaphysics is not trivial, and so far it is only a strategy for doing so. One problem is that the proposals mentioned above on a natural reading don't seem to make much difference. There really are infinitely many primes, so there really are numbers. And prime numbers are real, as opposed to merely imagined, etc.. On a natural reading of these ways of loading the question, it doesn't make any difference. But there are other ways to do this, in particular relying on a notion of metaphysical priority, which are our main concern here. Some radical ways of trying to do this seem to get things clearly wrong. I hope to make clear what they get wrong, and then look more carefully at whether other, less radical proposals fall foul of the same problem. This will lead to a general distinction between two ways of doing metaphysics, one good and one bad, and the problem of saying which concrete proposals fall on which side. Our main goal will be formulate a way to settle which proposals fall on the good side, and which fall on the bad side. In particular, our issue will be which notions of metaphysical priority can legitimately be used to defend a domain for metaphysics. This is important to keep in mind, since metaphysics itself can be understood in many different ways, and depending what one takes metaphysics to aim to achieve one can justify various different constraints on a notion of metaphysical priority that is to be used in metaphysics. Our question is not simply what notions of metaphysical priority can be used in metaphysics, understood some way or other, but instead this: what notions of metaphysical priority can legitimately be used to defend a domain for metaphysics, and to defend that metaphysics is ambitious, but modest, metaphysics. Many, but not all, metaphysicians, think of metaphysics that way, and our discussion to follow will be especially relevant to those who hold that metaphysics aims to answer questions of fact, that it has its own domain with a limited amount of autonomy, and that it should not simply await the results of the sciences. If we think of metaphysics that way, how could we legitimately load the question with a notion of metaphysical priority to show that metaphysics has its own domain?

2 Esoteric metaphysics

Let us approach the issue from the outside, so to speak, by first looking at an extreme case of defending a domain for metaphysics, one that we have good reason to reject. We can then hope to generalize what is wrong with this case, find a general minimal condition that any way to defend a domain for metaphysics by loading up the question would

have to meet, and finally see whether actually proposed examples meet this condition.

Our radical proposal goes as follows: Metaphysics is different from other parts of inquiry. The latter tries to find out what is the case and how things are, but metaphysics instead tries to find out what is metaphysically the case and how things are metaphysically. In other words, the domain of metaphysics is defined by the question

(3) What is metaphysically the case?

This would, on the face of it, solve our problem by loading the question. If we define the domain of metaphysics by the question (3) then it is defined by a question of fact that does not seem to be immediately answer by the results of other parts of inquiry. But something has clearly gone wrong, and the key is to put ones finger on what precisely. As a first step, let's consider what the difference is between something being the case and something being metaphysically the case. Here, by stipulation of the example, the proposal is explicit: being metaphysically the case is a primitive of metaphysics. It can't be spelled out in any further, more accessible terms. Furthermore, it is also inferentially isolated in the following way: first, what is the case doesn't imply what is metaphysically the case. Sure, there are prime numbers, but that doesn't imply that it is metaphysically the case that there are numbers. Whether it is metaphysically the case that there are numbers is left open by the facts established in mathematics. Partly because of that this notion can be used to define a domain for metaphysics. But, second, it also goes the other way round: it being metaphysically the case doesn't imply it being the case. It might well be metaphysically the case that there are no numbers, but that is compatible with the truth of mathematics, in particular with the truth that there are numbers. Thus even though it is metaphysically the case that there are no numbers, it is nonetheless the case that there are numbers. Being metaphysically the case is a primitive, novel metaphysical expression which is inferentially isolated, at least in this sense. Maybe there are some more complex inferential connections between what is the case and what is metaphysically the case, but there is no direct inferential connection between them.

What is metaphysics supposed to do then? Find out what is metaphysically the case, on this proposal. What if I don't get what that is supposed to be? Well, then maybe metaphysics isn't for you! Since being metaphysically the case is a primitive term of metaphysics that can't be spelled out in other commonly accessible notions it is for the metaphysicians and those alone to get what the project is all about. Metaphysics is thus only accessible to the insiders, and thus we can call metaphysics so understood *esoteric metaphysics*. Esoteric metaphysics is metaphysics that has the questions in its domain expressed

with metaphysical terms which are not generally accessible, for example by relying on novel, primitive metaphysical notions. We should contrast it with egalitarian metaphysics, which is metaphysics whose domain is defined by questions that are spelled out in terms that are accessible to all. Both of these deserve to be spelled out more carefully, and we will clarify the difference further below. They are intended to be exclusive, but not exhaustive. If metaphysics has no domain at all then neither one will be the right approach to metaphysics.

So far our example of esoteric metaphysics is an extreme toy example. But before looking into whether there are actual examples of esoteric metaphysics, let's see what is wrong with doing metaphysics the esoteric way. There are two things that are especially objectionable about it. First there is the problem of insufficient content: why should we think that 'it's metaphysically the case that p' has a determinate content? Simply because something is a primitive metaphysical term not accessible to all does not guarantee that it has no content, but the question remains why we should think that it does have content. Those who insist on using that notion would, of course, also insist that it has content, and that they get what it is, even though they can't spell it out in other terms. But this is only weak evidence for it having a determinate content, since wishful thinking likely is involved as well. We will see more on this below. Second, there is the problem of insufficient value: why should we care to find out what is metaphysically the case?² It would be unclear how it being metaphysically the case that there are no numbers would relate to the traditional concerns in the philosophy of mathematics. Would it mean mathematics does not derive its objectivity from mathematical objects? Would it affect what mathematical truth is? Why should we care at all to find out what is metaphysically the case, besides what is the case? So far we don't know, since we don't know what it being metaphysically the case that there are no numbers comes down to and what else it would affect. Without knowing any of that why won't have a clue why we should care to find out what is metaphysically the case.

Taking recourse to such a notion as being metaphysically the case can help define a domain of metaphysics, but metaphysics so understood is not a worthwhile project. It is not clear whether the questions so understood have a determinate content, and whether the answers given have any value. Esoteric metaphysics should be rejected, even though it would give metaphysics a domain in a sense. Defending metaphysics as being the ambitious project of finding out what

²See chapter 13 of [Hofweber, 2016] for both and [Dasgupta, 2018] for more on the latter.

is metaphysically the case might be an over-the-top example of esoteric metaphysics, but there are also real examples defended by actual philosophers. The clearest case seems to me to be Kit Fine's taking recourse to a distinctly metaphysical notion of Reality. As Fine says, for example in [Fine, 2001] and [Fine, 2005], in order to make sense of various metaphysical projects, we need to accept a notion of Reality that is distinct from our ordinary notion of reality, one that we might well be unable to spell out in other generally available terms. We metaphysicians must simply take ourselves to have that notion. Furthermore, it is arguable that that notion must be inferentially isolated in the above sense that how things are does not imply that things are that way in Reality and also not the other way round. It might well be that how things are in Reality is that everything is simple, while in fact there are tables and chairs. Fine's recourse to the notion of Reality seems to me to be the closest to something being metaphysically the case that is actually employed. It would lead to esoteric metaphysics just as well, and we should not follow Fine in relying on that notion, not unless more is said about it along the lines worked out below.³

3 Compare and contrast

The contrast between esoteric and egalitarian metaphysics was not made very precise above, and many of the notions used to mark the difference deserve further discussion. I would like to elaborate on what esoteric metaphysics is supposed to be a bit more now by contrasting it with other things which are nearby, but not objectionable. There are three important contrasts to be made:

First, no one is objecting to using novel metaphysical terms in metaphysics. What is objectionable is to use novel metaphysical terms in the questions that define the domain of metaphysics. It might well be a good idea to use novel terms in the answer to a well-defined question. Part of our answer to an egalitarian question might involve a novel term, maybe implicitly defined by the rest of the answer, or maybe standing for a theoretical posit. At worst this would reflect badly on the quality of the answer that was given to a well-defined question, but it wouldn't reflect badly on the question in the domain of metaphysics. It won't reflect badly on metaphysics as part of inquiry, at worst it would reflect badly on the present state of the discipline. This issue will be important below, and so I hope that contrast is clear enough.

³My own reading of Fine is one that he makes a somewhat more modest proposal than going straight esoteric. I take him to propose that in order for certain metaphysical debates to make sense, we must allow ourselves such a notion of reality, but this officially leaves open whether these debates do make sense in the end and whether issues like realism or the reality of tense are proper meaningful metaphysical debates.

To give one example of the contrast: suppose you think metaphysics is supposed to find out what a law of nature is and what the truth conditions of counterfactuals are, and in order to answer those questions you propose that there is a basic, undefined grading of properties as more or less natural, and then you use that relation among properties to answer your original questions then this is not esoteric metaphysics, since the original question was perfectly accessible to all. But if you start out by claiming that metaphysics is supposed to answer the question what the most natural properties are, using a primitive novel sense of ‘natural’, then this is esoteric metaphysics.

Second, other disciplines rely on heavy-duty notions from the discipline in the questions that define the discipline, i.e. what questions it is supposed to answer. Mathematics is a great example of this. Topology tries to find out what the mathematical properties of topological spaces are. Recursion theory tries to determine the mathematical features of recursive functions, and so on. Having a notion from mathematics in the question that defines the domain of a subfield of mathematics does not, however, make it an esoteric discipline. Mathematics, despite its esoteric appearance, is a paradigm of an egalitarian project. All those complicated mathematical notions are explicitly defined, and they are ultimately defined in notions that are available to all: that of a number, a collection, etc.. True enough, these notions are often refined from more ordinary notions, but they come back to our shared repertoire, and they do so in a very obvious way, paradigmatically by explicit definition. Nothing, or hardly anything, could be more egalitarian. Even the most complicated mathematics is introduced explicitly, step by step, from only our basic shared conceptual repertoire.

Third, it also would be a mistake to think that the rejection of esoteric metaphysics brings with it that primitive metaphysical notions that can’t be spelled out in informative ways have no place in metaphysics. They might well be useful as an intermediary. One might hold that, somehow, it is coherent to think that even though there are infinitely many primes, in Reality (not to be confused with reality) there are no numbers at all. This might be taken as a first attempt to articulate a position which still needs to be properly articulated. Maybe we don’t know how to articulate it yet, and so we just express a certain vision of a position. Similarly, one might hold that dividing bunches of matter into things that are properly objects and those that are not *transcendentally depends* on us (although not counterfactually, nor in other familiar senses of dependence). That could be a start for a view, but it can’t be a final articulation of the view. It might be an intermediate resting place towards an egalitarian account, or maybe a promissory note of such an account to be filled in. What it can’t be is a proposal of a final answer, spelled out as much as it needs to be spelled out. More needs to be said here: how is transcendental dependence

supposed to be understood? But even though more needs to be said here it shouldn't be taken to mean that one can't say what one has so far. Often this is quite useful to articulate one's vision this way. But this in itself can't be taken to be the answer, only a step towards it.

What is crucial for a defense of a domain of metaphysics to be esoteric is whether the esoteric notions appear in the questions that define the domain, whether they can be spelled out in terms of our shared repertoire, and thus whether they are accessible to everyone. What precisely spelling out or making a notion accessible comes down to is not clear, of course, and more has to be said here. There are some clear cases on how to spell out a notion, for example explicitly defining it, but less might do as well. But we should now focus on our most substantial and difficult case: the question whether or not relying on a notion of metaphysical priority to define the domain of metaphysics is a gateway to esoteric metaphysics. This is a slightly more general version of the question whether or not thinking of the question of ontology as concerning what the most fundamental things are leads to esoteric metaphysics. In particular, how can we decide whether a proposed notion of metaphysical priority leads to esoteric metaphysics?

So far then the lengthy, but I am afraid necessary, setup of our main problem. I suspect that this setup by itself is not too controversial, but where to go from here will certainly be controversial.

4 Metaphysical priority

Although Fine's use of Reality seems to me to be quite clearly esoteric, for other ways of loading the question this is not so clear. The most important cases to consider are approaches to metaphysics that rely on a notion of metaphysical priority, and take the domain of metaphysics to be defined by the question what is most basic or most fundamental or what is prior to what, on a given sense of metaphysical priority. To put a label on it, we can call priority metaphysics those approaches to metaphysics that hold that the domain of metaphysics is defined by questions concerning facts about priority in the relevant sense of 'priority'.⁴ Are such approaches to metaphysics esoteric and thus to be rejected?

It is clear that many notions of priority are perfectly egalitarian and several of them are important for metaphysics as it is widely carried out, and thus these notions deserve the general label 'metaphysical priority'. Take, for example, counterfactual dependence or notions of

⁴Paradigmatically, see [Schaffer, 2009].

priority spelled out in modal terms, paradigmatically notions of supervenience. These are clear cases of egalitarian notions. The concepts of supervenience in their many forms are explicitly spelled out in terms of modal notions, and modal notions like that of what has to be the case, or what would be the case is something where the case, are clearly egalitarian. We can see that they are egalitarian not only because everyone uses them in their ordinary reasoning, but also because we can see in general what function modal and counterfactual reasoning has in ordinary reasoning. Thinking about what would have happened had things been different is important to weigh different outcomes, to learn from mistakes, to think about what to do differently tomorrow, etc.. What is left open by this is whether or not there is a distinctly metaphysical sense of modality which is different from accessible senses of modality, and which thus has to be taken as primitive that can't be spelled out in more accessible terms. But simply using modal notions by themselves should be unobjectionable. It is however widely acknowledged that such notions alone can't easily define a domain of metaphysics. Simply relying on modal notions won't be enough. It won't help us much in domains where things are necessary anyways, like mathematics. And it won't help to give metaphysics its own domain unless these notions are used in a distinctly metaphysical sense. What is needed, on the most standard way to pursue this line, are hyperintensional notions, ones that distinguish more finely than modal notions. Hyperintensionality itself is unproblematic and unobjectionable, just as modal notions are. Many egalitarian notions are hyperintensional, so simply being hyperintensional does not render a notion esoteric. Notions like belief, or being surprised by, etc., are hyperintensional and clearly egalitarian. Can we thus rely on such a hyperintensional notion of priority to define the domain of metaphysics and to properly load the questions metaphysics is supposed to address? If so, which notion of metaphysical priority could play this role? Let us call a notion of metaphysical priority that can be central in defining the domain of metaphysics a substantial notion of priority. Uncontroversially, there are metaphysical notions of priority, i.e. notions of priority that are used in metaphysics, like causal dependence, counterfactual dependence, constitution, etc. etc..⁵ What is unclear is whether there are also substantial notions of priority, and thus whether a domain of metaphysics can be defined with one of them.⁶ Our question thus is

⁵To my surprise, Jessica Wilson takes me to deny this in her [Wilson, 2014], mistakenly, as I hope to make more clear below.

⁶One strategy might be to get a substantial notion of priority from the various metaphysical notions of priority, say in the simplest case as 'is more basic in one of these ways'. But this won't work, for the simple reason that the various notions of priority do not always agree on what is more basic. A much more sophisticated approach along those lines is defended in [Bennett, 2017]. I have argued in [Hofweber, 2019] that it won't solve

whether we have a substantial notion of priority available to make clear that metaphysics has a domain.

A natural candidate for doing this is to rely on notions of explanation or fundamentality. The former is certainly egalitarian, and the latter is likely egalitarian in connection with the former, i.e. where the fundamental is that which explains the rest. Metaphysics could then focus on the fundamental, and wonder what the world is fundamentally like, or what fundamental reality is like. It could try to claim for itself the question whether fundamentally there are numbers, or whether numbers are part of fundamental reality, and leave the questions whether there are numbers to mathematics and triviality. More generally, this approach might hold that other parts of inquiry look at what the world is like in ways relevant for them, metaphysics tries to find out what fundamental reality is like. But fundamentality tied to explanation, even non-causal explanation, by itself won't motivate such a project properly. The case that brings this home, for me at least, is the case of non-causal explanation and fundamentality in mathematics. For the case of arithmetic prime numbers are special among the numbers. Mathematical facts about numbers can often be explained in terms of facts about prime numbers, and prime numbers are the most fundamental of the numbers. It isn't for nothing that the Fundamental Theorem of Arithmetic is the result that every number can be uniquely decomposed into primes. But this does not show that prime numbers are metaphysically special among the numbers, or that fundamentally there are only prime numbers, or that fundamental arithmetical reality consists only of prime numbers. Prime numbers are special in that they are fundamental for arithmetic, but arithmetical reality still either contains no numbers at all or all the numbers, primes and composites equally.⁷ Relying on just the notion of explanation by itself won't be good enough to define a domain of metaphysics. What would be needed is a special kind of explanation: metaphysical explanation, where a metaphysical explanation gets you close to what is *really* the case. It would have to be a special kind of explanation that reveals an hierarchy among facts from the more basic and more real to the less basic and real. Such a notion of explanation must be distinguished from just regular explanation, which does not do that. But whether the notion of metaphysical explanation is an egalitarian notion is a completely different story.

Can we thus define the domain of metaphysics with a notion of metaphysical priority? Can we load the questions properly to have a

the problem we are concerned with here.

⁷For a discussion of priority, grounds, and explanation in mathematics, see also [Lange, 2019].

domain for metaphysics? Here we are facing a dilemma: On the one hand we have clearly egalitarian notions of priority, but they won't get us much or won't get us what we wanted. On the other hand, we have approaches which would get us what we want, but they quite clearly lead to esoteric metaphysics. If we simply introduce such a notion of priority as a novel primitive, not to be spelled out in other terms, but insist that we need such a notion in order to carry out metaphysics, then we get esoteric metaphysics. For example, it is natural to read Jonathan Schaffer this way when he says:

Grounding should rather be taken as *primitive* [...] Grounding is an unanalyzable but needed notion - it is *the primitive structuring conception of metaphysics*. [Schaffer, 2009, 364] (emphasis in the original)

Although it is natural to read Schaffer in this quote as affirming that we need to add a new notion of grounding to our concepts, we can also understand claims of the primitiveness of grounding that we already have such a notion among our shared concepts, and that this notion is primitive and can't be spelled out further. The former leads to esoteric metaphysics, the latter to egalitarian metaphysics. And the latter is the way to go if we want to define the domain of metaphysics with a notion of metaphysical priority. In fact, the only really promising path to tying the fate of metaphysics to metaphysical priority is instead this: to hold that we do have such a notion available as part of our shared conceptual repertoire. There would be no need to spell out the notion of priority in other terms (maybe that can't be done), and there is no need to endorse esoteric metaphysics (which shouldn't be done) if we all already all have that notion. Our shared repertoire does, of course, contain notions central to metaphysics, and it does contain notions that are primitive and can't be spelled out further. So, do we have such an egalitarian notion of metaphysical priority that we can hope to rely on in the characterization of the domain of metaphysics? To my mind, much is at stake for metaphysics in how this question is answered. I don't think this question is easy to answer, but I do think there are several attempts at answering that are unsuccessful. In the next section I want to defend these claims by first considering why the question is not answered by example, but after that I want to propose a method on how it can be answered, and how things look at present with regard to how the question is answered on the proposed method.

5 Egalitarian, but primitive, notions of metaphysical priority

5.1 The method of examples

The standard way to argue for an affirmative answer to this question is an argument by example.⁸ Here we are given an example of something being more basic or prior, etc., to something else, especially an example where it is clear that no modal notion of priority could be the notion of priority involved. The fact that we all clearly assent to a given example is then taken as evidence that we do have a metaphysical notion of priority as part of our repertoire. Not everyone agrees with this methodology. For example, Chris Daly has argued that relying on examples to motivate a notion of metaphysical priority like grounding is simply question begging, since the skeptic about grounding will simply reject the examples.⁹ I disagree with Daly on this point. The examples do make a *prima facie* case in favor of such a notion, but one that disappears on reflection on the details of the cases. I hope to illustrate this issue with one of the most famous examples of this kind: Kit Fine's singleton Socrates example. The example can be given using different notions, one being explanation or 'because':

- (4) Singleton Socrates exists because Socrates exists, but not the other way round.

Another version uses 'ground' or similar notions of priority:

- (5) Singleton Socrates is grounded in Socrates, but not the other way round.

There is widespread agreement with (4) and (5), even if we assume that a set containing an object necessarily exist just when the object exists, and thus there is no relevant modal difference between the existence of Socrates and of his singleton. Thus, the argument by example goes, we have clear access to a notion of priority that is hyperintensional — grounding — which can be used to define the domain of metaphysics.

But this line of argument strikes me as mistaken. The argument from example focuses on there being examples where we make judgments about priority, and concludes from it that we have an egalitarian notion of priority available to define the domain of metaphysics. The fans of grounding jump on the fact that we make judgments of priority in this case at all, and they hold that it shows our having a notion of grounding available, one suitable to define a domain for metaphysics.

⁸See [Correia and Schnieder, 2012] for the basics, and for many further references.

⁹See [Daly, 2012].

But this neglects to look at the other aspect of our judgements: that we all agree on what is prior to what in the proposed cases. What needs to be explained here is our uniformity of judgement, not just that we make judgments of priority. So, there are two aspects connected to our practice of making judgments of priority: that we make such judgments at all, and what we judge to be prior to what. My focus now is the second, and in particular the fact that for many of the classic examples we all seem to agree in what we judge to be prior to what, in whatever sense of prior we make these judgments. We need to explain why we all agree that Socrates is prior, in some relevant sense, to singleton Socrates. Why do we agree that the priority goes this way? I would like to suggest that there is a connection between what the subject matter of such judgments is and what explains the uniformity of our judgements about what is prior to what. There is an explanation of our uniformity of judgement that undermines the idea that the notion of priority employed in (5) is suitable to define a domain for metaphysics. The explanation is this: There is a conceptual truth about the concept of a set that asymmetrically connects singleton sets to their members. The conceptual truth is that a set only exists when its members exist. However, it is not a conceptual truth that whenever an object exists then there is also a set containing just that object. It is conceptually coherent, even if impossible, that there are no sets at all, and thus in particular that there are no singleton sets even though there are people. But not the other way round: it is not conceptually coherent that there are singleton sets of people, but no people. These conceptual asymmetries can explain why there is uniformity in judgement about priority between a singleton and its object. Since it is a conceptual truth, everyone with the concept has, somehow, access to it, and so there is no surprise, in principle, about there being uniformity in judgement connected to conceptual truths. However, conceptual truths are not suitable to define a domain of metaphysics as it is generally conceived of, and a notion of priority tied to conceptual truth isn't either. Thus what explains why we uniformly judge the order of priority in these examples the same way undermines the idea that the subject matter of these judgments is a substantial notion of priority in our above sense. And with it it undermines the idea that these examples motivate that we have such a substantial notion of priority available in our shared conceptual repertoire.¹⁰

¹⁰For further recent discussions of Fine's singleton Socrates example and how to understand the dependence of a set on its members, see also [Incurvati, 2012] and [Wigglesworth, 2015]. The present response to Fine does not rely on any subtleties in the philosophy of set theory, like the status of the iterative conception of a set. The present explanation of our judgements of priority only relies on a conceptual truth about sets in general.

This general problem appears in arguing for a notion of metaphysical priority to be egalitarian. In other examples we also have uniformity in judgements of priority and an explanation for this uniformity that shows that the relevant notion about which we judge is not a substantial metaphysical notion of priority. Instead, there are a variety of different notions of priority at work in these examples. Some of them are metaphysical notions of priority, in the sense that they play a role in metaphysics as practiced, and rightly so, but which are not substantial, in the sense that they are unsuitable to define a domain for metaphysics. Other notions of priority are not even metaphysical in this sense, since they concern mostly epistemic or conceptual priority. The explanation for why there is uniformity is that the relevant sense of priority about which we make judgements is for many of these examples tied to conceptual connections, or logical asymmetries, or asymmetric counterfactual dependence, or asymmetric epistemic relations, or any of a number of other other asymmetrical relations that are generally taken to be unsuitable to be employed as notions of priority with which to define the domain of metaphysics. A conceptual asymmetry explains our priority judgements and their uniformity in the singleton Socrates case, but let me also briefly mention another widely used example that has a different explanation than relying on conceptual priority. The conjuncts A, B are widely judged to be more basic, in some sense, than the conjunction $A \& B$ in which they occur. Even though the conjuncts together are logically equivalent to the conjunction, and we can take this equivalence to be a conceptual truth, nonetheless there is uniformity in judgement that the conjuncts are more basic than the conjunction. In this case there is no relevant conceptual asymmetry, but there is an epistemic one. The default way to find out whether a conjunction is true is to find out whether each of the conjuncts is true, but not the other way round. Normally you can't find out whether both A as well as B are true by first finding out whether the conjunction is true. I say 'normally' since this doesn't have to be so. There could be a book of true conjunctions that would be easier to consult than trying to find out about A as well as B separately. But in general we don't have such a book, and we all realize that if you want to know whether $A \& B$ you need to look at A as well as B first. And this explains a sense in which we all judge that the conjuncts are more basic than the conjunction, even though they are equivalent.¹¹ Relying on examples often involves a bait-and-switch, where examples with a variety of different non-substantial notions of priority are presented which is then taken to illustrate that we have a

¹¹I discuss this example, as well as a number of further ones, in more detail in chapter 13 of [Hofweber, 2016]. Michael Raven in [Raven, 2011] and Paul Audi in [Audi, 2012] try to defend grounding against these arguments as presented in [Hofweber, 2009].

single substantial notion of priority available.

There is some similarity between this view and grounding pluralist views like those of Kathrin Koslicki in [Koslicki, 2015] and Jessica Wilson in [Wilson, 2014].¹² Both Koslicki and Wilson deny that there is a single grounding relation at issue in these various judgments, as do I. But contrary to them, it seems to me that the examples do not support that there are many grounding relations instead of just one. They support that there are many relations of priority, but leaves open whether any of them is a grounding relation, as that term is commonly intended. That intent is to connect it to the view that reality is structured, that there is a hierarchy in reality which in turn is part of the subject matter of metaphysics. So understood grounding, be it one or many relations, is a substantial notion of metaphysical priority, and thus suitable to define the domain of metaphysics, at least partly. I do not go as far as Koslicki and Wilson in this regard. Instead I hold that there are many notions of priority, and the examples do not support that any of them express a grounding relation.¹³ In this contrast between two groups of views we should distinguish a verbal and a substantial issue. The verbal one is simply about which priority relations deserve the name ‘grounding’. Obviously, nothing by itself hangs on this. The substantial issue is one about which priority relations have the features that grounding is often taken to have. On the common conception of what grounding is supposed to be, it is a substantial notion of priority, one that tracks a hierarchy in reality, which in turn is the distinct subject matter of metaphysics. As I understand Koslicki and Wilson, they accept that there are substantial notions of priority among the many grounding notions, but they deny that there is unity to them. And in the former, I think they go too far, although in the latter I am with them. Wilson understands the contrast between her view and mine somewhat differently. She says:

“Hofweber is concerned to argue that any supposed grasp of metaphysical priority in general is really grasp of some non-metaphysical relation.” [Wilson, 2014, 566]

But this is not so. There are many metaphysical relations of priority and some of them are grasped in the examples that are supposed to motivate that we have a notion of grounding available. No one in this debate denies that there are metaphysical notions of priority like counterfactual dependence, causal priority, supervenience, and so on, and neither do I, of course. No one denies that we have a grasp of metaphysical notions of priority, understood as notions of priority that

¹²See also [Trogon, 2013] for a comparison. For a different kind of skepticism about grounding, see [Kovacs, 2017].

¹³See also [Berker, 2018, 761] for this contrast.

play a role in metaphysics. What is at issue instead is whether we have a substantial notion of metaphysical priority, one that can be used to define the domain of metaphysics. Grounding, as it is intended, could do this. What I am concerned with is to argue that in examples that suggest *prima facie* that we do have a grasp of a substantial notion of priority we really grasp a non-substantial notion of priority. Thus the examples do not motivate that we have a notion of grounding as it is intended, although clearly we have many metaphysical notions of priority. Although examples *prima facie* provide some reason to accept that we do have a notion of grounding available, on further investigation we can see that these reasons disappear. I thus do not think that examples alone establish that we do have a substantial metaphysical notion of priority in our shared conceptual repertoire. So far then priority metaphysics remains esoteric.

5.2 The cognitive function challenge

To define the domain of metaphysics with a notion of metaphysical priority, and thus to defend priority metaphysics, requires the availability of some suitable notion of metaphysical priority: one that is a substantial notion of priority, in the above sense. Grounding, as it is intended by many, could play this role, and other similar notions like being more fundamental than, being the metaphysical explanation of, and so on, could do likewise. But these approaches face the danger of turning metaphysics understood along the lines they suggest into esoteric metaphysics. And although some might be happy with being esoteric, it seems to me to be a way of giving up on metaphysics, rather than to defend it and clarify its role among other parts of inquiry. To avoid seeing priority metaphysics as esoteric metaphysics, we need to either spell out the substantial notion of priority in other, egalitarian terms, or establish that we do have this notion already available, possibly as a primitive notion that can't be spelled out. Spelling it out has proven to be less than fruitful, and so most true believers take it as primitive. But arguing by example that we do have a primitive substantial notion of priority available is unsuccessful, or so I have argued above, since the proper explanation of the uniformity of our judgment of priority in the examples points to that the notion of priority involved in these judgments is not a substantial notion of priority, but rather a different notion, be it an insubstantial metaphysical one, or some other notion of priority. Now, this argument is not conclusive one way or the other, since we did not consider all examples, although we did consider some of the most prominent ones: singleton Socrates and conjunction vs. conjuncts. Many other examples in the literature remain, and new examples might be forthcoming. Still, the challenge to the method of examples remains: when we wonder why we judge

priority uniformly to go one way then it will be hard to explain why that is so if the relevant notion of priority is a substantial one, and not one of the more down to earth ones tied to our shared epistemology, conceptual priorities, causal and counterfactual reasoning and so on. The issue is thus not easily settled with examples, and the question remains how else one might settle it.

And one way forward from this impasse is to consider the source of doubt that some have about giving grounding a central role in metaphysics. Here I refer not so much to doubts of “second generation” skeptics about grounding, in Koslicki’s [Koslicki, 2019] sense, who accept the notion of grounding as perfectly fine, but deny that there is a single grounding relation which is of special metaphysical significance, who include Koslicki herself or Wilson. Instead the worry is connected to that of “old-school” skeptics, also Koslicki’s term, like Chris Daly, myself, and lots of philosophers who work primarily outside of metaphysics, who have a problem with the very notion of grounding and whether we indeed have a grasp on this concept as it is intended. And here one version of the old schooler’s concern can be formulated as follows: pointing to the formal properties grounding is supposed to have does not show, and barely motivates, that we have a grasp on the content of this notion. Pointing to examples could motivate that we have such a grasp, but the examples are usually a bait-and-switch, and thus fail in the end. But what is more, if the notion of grounding, or one of its associate concepts, is supposed to be a primitive concept that can’t be spelled out in other ways, but that nonetheless is part of our conceptual repertoire, then why do we have this concept in the first place? What place in our conceptual repertoire is this concept supposed to occupy? What function does this concept have in our minds? The answer to these questions can’t be: so that we can do priority metaphysics. If we do have this concept then we can do priority metaphysics, but our being able to do priority metaphysics can’t be the reason why we have this concept in the first place. We can’t expect to have a primitive concept whose function is simply to allow us to engage in a certain kind of metaphysics, unless it can be argued that engaging in this kind of metaphysics is itself central to our shared mental lives, something that does not seem very promising. If we do have such a concept as a primitive, basic concept then its primary function must be something else. There must be some other reason why we have it, some other role that it plays in our cognitive lives, such that derivatively that concept also allows us to engage in a certain kind of metaphysics. The question then is: what is the primary function of the notion of grounding or its associates in our cognitive lives? What is the cognitive function that these concepts have?

To claim that we have a primitive concept of grounding, whose

primary function is to allow us to engage in metaphysics is not too dissimilar in claiming that there is a special reading of conditionals, counter-conventional conditionals, whose function is to allow us to talk about how the world depends, in a novel sense of dependence, on our convention,¹⁴ or that we have a special notion of reality in our shared conceptual repertoire, reality as it is in itself, whose primary function is to allow us to articulate transcendental idealism. Our shared concepts did not develop, I conjecture, for such specific metaphysical needs. If we have such concepts at all, they must be derivative on other concepts, somehow, either directly or with help from the world, or they must have some other primary function. The cognitive function challenge is the challenge to say what this other primary function is. I believe the fate of priority metaphysics hangs on whether this challenge can be met.

Let me briefly elaborate on the challenge, and then declare where I think things stand with regards to it. First, the challenge is, of course, not unique to grounding, it applies more generally to any primitive notion that is supposed to play a central role in metaphysics. Many notions that play a key metaphysical role are not, and often cannot, be spelled out further and thus should plausibly be taken as a primitive concepts: cause, object, existence, counterfactual conditionals, modality and so on. To be sure, there is a real issue whether all of those notions are primitive, or whether some of them can be understood in terms of the other one: maybe existence can be understood in terms of objects or the other way round, and maybe counterfactual conditionals can be understood in terms of modality, or the other way round. What is important for us here is that for each of these concepts it is in outline clear that they play a role in our shared, ordinary cognition, and even what it is roughly. Causation plays a key role in thinking about what to do, in planning for the future, etc.. Counterfactual conditionals play a key role in learning from the past, from one's mistakes, and how to do better the next time around. None of this is deeply puzzling, although the details of the function of any of these concepts is itself clearly a rather substantial question. An "old school" style skeptical challenge to the legitimacy of counterfactuals or causation or object, etc., in metaphysics is easily answered: even if these notions cannot be spelled out in more accessible terms, we have good reason to think that they are perfectly fine, meaningful, and well enough understood. Not only are they clearly widely used outside of metaphysics, but we can also see, in outline, what their cognitive function is. And that function is not to engage in metaphysical debates, but to conduct ordinary reasoning about the past and the future, thinking about what to do, and other ordinary things. The cognitive function challenge applies to all of our

¹⁴See [Einheuser, 2006] for such a proposal, and chapter 2 of [Hofweber, 202X] for criticism.

primitive concepts that play a role in metaphysics. And it can quite easily be met, at least in outline, for many. Although for each of them the detailed account of their function in our cognitive lives is complex and involved, that they have such a function and what it roughly is is perfectly clear. Metaphysics defined via questions involving those notions is thus perfectly egalitarian. But can the challenge also be met for grounding or similar notions like metaphysical explanation, “because” in a metaphysical sense, metaphysical dependence, and so on? The cognitive function challenge is to say what the function of these allegedly primitive notions is in our shared cognition.

Second, to meet the cognitive function challenge is different from spelling out a notion in other terms. To spell out a notion in other terms is, in the most straightforward case, to clarify and explain that notion in other terms, in particular to say what it means in other terms. Nothing like this is required to meet the cognitive function challenge. The cognitive function challenge can be met for primitive notions that can’t in any illustrative way be spelled out like that. To meet the cognitive function challenge one simply has to say what role that notion plays in our cognitive lives, in particular in our ordinary thinking. That can be done with primitive notions just as well as with derivative ones.

Third, the issue is not simply what the function of the concept of grounding or causation is in isolation. The issue is what the function of that concept is in our cognitive lives. The former might well be quite trivial: the function of the concept of causation is to be about causation, or to represent the causal relation. The function of the concept of ground is to be about grounding or to represent the grounding relation, and similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for all other concepts. Any concept can be understood along those lines, but that does not explain why we all have this concept. Why is it that a concept like cause is part of our shared conceptual repertoire? The idea for an answer is that this concept plays some central role in our shared cognitive lives which explains why we have it. The concept has some function in our cognition, it does something that some concept or other needs to do for creatures like us, and that’s why we have it. For the concept of cause it is, roughly and in outline, clear that this is so and what that function is. If the concept of ground is to meet the cognitive function challenge, one should spell out what role that concept has in our ordinary mental lives. What place does this concept have in the cognitive lives of creatures like us that would explain why we all have it?

Fourth, if one wants to meet the challenge by specifying what role the notion plays in metaphysics and in our metaphysical theorizing, then this can’t be accepted as the complete account unless one can also say what role such theorizing plays in our ordinary cognitive lives and how this role explains why we all have such a concept, even when we

don't engage in metaphysics explicitly. For something to be a primitive concept in our shared conceptual repertoire, it likely needs to have a reasonably wide cognitive role. To insist that it only has a role among metaphysicians is a paradigm way of endorsing esoteric metaphysics. Concepts like cause or counterfactual conditionals clearly have a wide role in our thinking. They are heavily used outside of metaphysical theorizing, as well as inside of it.

This then is what needs to be done: In order to avoid collapsing priority metaphysics into esoteric metaphysics, one either needs to spell out the notion of priority on which one's version of priority metaphysics is based, and do so in terms accessible to all, or else one should accept the relevant notion of priority as a primitive. If it is to be spelled out then it is not required to explicitly define it, but it needs to be made clear how this notion can be accessed by those who do not have it, and thus how it can be egalitarian, even though it is not in general among the shared repertoire of our shared concepts. What precisely needs to be done to "spell out" a notion is not completely clear, but merely spelling out formal properties it is supposed to have is not enough. Nor is it enough to point to examples, since examples in which the concept figures can best point to the role it is supposed to play, but not illuminate its content or meaning, assuming those aren't simply to be exhausted by it playing this role. My sense is that few people in the contemporary debate would like to take this option.

On the other hand, if the notion is taken as a primitive, which I take to be the popular option to take, then it won't be enough to point to some examples where one of these concepts is used in some intelligible way. There being such examples does not show that we have a grasp on a substantial notion of priority, in particular not if the explanation of why we uniformly judge the order of priority the same way involves the recognition that the notion of priority relied on in the example is a rather innocent one. To properly show that we have a substantial notion of priority it is not enough to give examples, or to work out the formal, logical properties the notion is taken to have. Examples and formal properties can play a positive role, it seems to me, but they are not enough. What needs to be done in addition is to meet the cognitive function challenge. One must show, at least in outline, what role this notion plays in our ordinary cognitive lives, outside of professional metaphysics, such that it playing that role makes it reasonable that we indeed all have a concept in our shared conceptual repertoire that plays this role. Meeting the cognitive function challenge can nicely go together with illuminating putative examples in which the priority relation is supposed to figure in. Once one has made clear what function such a concept is supposed to play, one can then make clear that its playing this function is on display in the putative

examples. The concept occurs in these examples exactly because here it plays the function for which we need it.

If we can show this, as we can in outline for notions of modality, causation, and so on, then we should accept that there is indeed such a notion available to us. And if so, then the role this notion plays in our ordinary thinking will shed a most valuable light on what the job of priority metaphysics is. It would elucidate much about priority metaphysics via the function of the relevant notion of priority in our ordinary thinking. But if we can't meet the cognitive function challenge then we should conclude that we do not have such a notion available to play a central role in priority metaphysics. And without such a notion of priority there is little point to priority metaphysics, unless, of course, one collapses it into esoteric metaphysics. But that, as noted above, that is not a way to defend metaphysics, but a way to give up on it.

My own assessment of the present situation is that the cognitive function challenge has not been met so far. Several steps have been taken in the right direction: the investigation of the relationship between grounding and explanation, for example. But although it is clear that explanation has a role in our thinking, it is unclear what role distinctly metaphysical explanation is supposed to have, if there is supposed to be such thing at all. On the other hand, I also think that it hasn't been shown that the cognitive function challenge can't be met. To show that priority metaphysics is doomed, even as a vision that hasn't yet been achieved, something along these lines would need to be argued for, and it is hard to see how that could be done. Still, until the challenge is met, the smart money is on a rejection of priority metaphysics. There are too many reasonable doubts about the motivation of our having a grasp on these alleged substantial notions of priority as motivated by example to pin one's hopes for a whole program in metaphysics on them. But to reject priority metaphysics is not a rejection of metaphysics, of course, although much these days in metaphysics is wedded to the priority metaphysics program. Metaphysics is fine even without a primitive and substantial notion of priority, or so it seems to me. Metaphysics can be shown to have a domain, with a good deal of autonomy from other parts of inquiry, even without a substantial notion of priority, or so I have argued in [Hofweber, 2016]. But how metaphysics is to be carried out that way is quite different than for priority metaphysicians. Thus overall a lot hangs on whether the cognitive function challenge can be met.

In a recent paper on grounding, Jonathan Schaffer addressed worries that grounding is not intelligible or at least doesn't have a clear enough meaning. Schaffer calls Chris Daly and myself "nihilists about

grounding” since we reject that there is a clear enough notion of grounding, at least as intended and as a substantial notion of priority. At the end of his defense of grounding, Schaffer notes:

[...] I continue to think that, in order to communicate a concept it suffices in general to provide paradigm cases, offer useful analogies, and enfold the concept in a formalism [...]. I have tried to do just that. The denier of intelligibility may take this as an invitation to show where I have failed, or to explain what more is generally needed to render a concept intelligible and soothe a troubled mind.[Schaffer, 2016, 92–93]

I, in turn, have tried to do just that: show what more needs to be done to sooth ones legitimate troubles about grounding: meet the cognitive function challenge and show what role the notion plays in our thought.¹⁵

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