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The Place of the Philosophy of Language in Metaphysics

Thomas Hofweber

5.1 The language–metaphysics gap

Although the philosophy of language had a special and distinguished place among philosophical disciplines for a good while since the rise of analytic philosophy, this central role has to a large extent been lost in the meantime. This is particularly true for the role of the philosophy of language in metaphysics. Considerations from the philosophy of language play no distinguished role in metaphysics in the contemporary debate, and apparently for good reason. The philosophy of language concerns language, naturally, and what we do with our languages. It is concerned with such problems as how we represent the world linguistically, what the basic structure of our languages is, how we use these languages in communication, and so on. Metaphysics, on the other hand, concerns what reality is like. It aims to find out about the most general features of reality. In particular, metaphysics concerns reality as it is, not merely as how we represent it to be. Thus there is little work for the philosophy of language in metaphysics. The philosophy of language is focused on us and our representations. Metaphysics is focused on reality in general instead. How we represent the world is by itself no guide to how reality is, since our representations can be mistaken or even utterly inadequate for reality. How we represent reality might thus be informative about us and our minds, but besides that it alone does not tell us anything about reality in general. The philosophy of language is thus very informative about our representations of reality, but not directly about

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Thomas Hofweber, *The Place of the Philosophy of Language in Metaphysics* In: *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Language Volume 3*. Edited by: Ernie Lepore and David Sosa, Oxford University Press.
© Thomas Hofweber 2023. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198892724.003.0005

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reality. Therefore the philosophy of language has no special place in metaphysics, and it is no wonder that it indeed plays no central role in contemporary metaphysics.

This simple thought, which we will look at more closely shortly, has a number of consequences, both for metaphysics, but also for philosophy in general and how different parts of philosophy relate to each other. For metaphysics it means that however we are supposed to make progress in it, it won't come from thinking about our own way of representing the world. That is in a sense too bad, since our representations of the world are reasonably accessible to us. It is no miracle how we can find out all kinds of insightful things about how we represent reality in thought or language. We have numerous sources of evidence available to us that support proposals about which sentences are grammatical, which ones are meaningful, and even which ones follow from which other ones.[1] But thinking about our representations of reality is not a direct way of determining which representations are true or false, with the possible exception of extreme cases like analytic truths or analytic falsehoods. The philosophy of language does not directly concern which sentences are true, that is to be found out elsewhere in inquiry. It only concerns other aspects of sentences: what they mean, what we do with them when we assert them, what their grammar is, and so on. None of that is a guide to what reality in general is like. To find out about that we need to pursue other avenues. But which ones? Much of contemporary metaphysics is quite divided about how such progress can happen. Among the options are moving closer to the sciences and piggybacking on their discoveries. We could then aim to derive answers to metaphysical questions from the discoveries of the empirical sciences.[2] Or maybe metaphysics has to make decisions on the basis of theoretical virtues alone, considering simply which metaphysical theories are simplest, most parsimonious, and so on.[3] Or maybe metaphysics does not answer question of fact at all, but instead merely concerns the construction of models of what is believed to be the facts,[4] or with the selection of useful concepts,[5] or

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[1] See Ludlow (2011) for more on evidence in linguistics.
[2] See, for example, Ladyman and Ross (2007).
[3] See Sider (2013).
[4] See Godfrey-Smith (2006).
[5] See Carnap (1956) and Thomasson (2016).

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the repair of flawed concepts,[6] and so on. But all of these proposals in one way or another diminish metaphysics by either taking it to be merely derivative on the sciences, or to be much more speculative and thinly supported than other parts of inquiry, or, worst case, not to be a proper part of inquiry at all, but simply focused on our own flawed ways to represent the world. None is quite what metaphysics aspired to be in the eyes of many practitioners.

All this so far assumes that reality is just there, independently of our language. But maybe that is false. Maybe there is some kind of a dependence on some or all of reality on our representations, and because of this it is possible after all to derive conclusions about reality from thinking merely about how we represent reality. Examples of such attempts include Simon Blackburn's (1984) quasi-realism, which is intended to apply to specific subset of all the truths and all the facts, for example the moral truths. More radial is Richard Gaskin's (2020) linguistic idealism, which takes all facts to be derivative on language. But for either one of these proposals, it is difficult to make sense of the kind of dependence that certain truths have on language. Gaskin relies on a primitive notion of 'transcendental precipitate' to formulate his claim that the world is "…a transcendental precipitate of language" (Gaskin 2020, 197). Although Gaskin says much more about the linguistic idealism he defends, the notion of a 'transcendental precipitate' is left as a primitive notion, and with that it is hard to see what the view comes to, not to speak of how we should evaluate the reasons given in its favor. Not unrelatedly, it is notoriously difficult to spell out the quasi-realist position and to distinguish it from straightforward realism, where there is no sense of dependence of morality on language or on what speakers do with their assertions of moral language.[7] Thus few have found much promise in the proposal that facts depend on our language, either in general or at least in large parts. Although some facts clearly do depend on us and our language, these are paradigmatically facts about us and our language, like the fact that learning French is hard. But that there is a sense of dependence in which a large part of all the facts depend on us and our language in this sense of dependence is something that is widely

[6] See Scharp (2018). [7] See Dreier (2004).

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rejected, and for good reason. And this then seems to seal the hope for making progress in metaphysics by simply thinking about our representations of the world: which facts obtain is in general independent of us and our representations, and so thinking about our representations is informative about us and what we do, but not directly about the world in general. Since metaphysics aims at the world in general, it should look elsewhere than at language, and so the philosophy of language is not of significance for metaphysics, or so says the widely held argument. And this is reflected in contemporary metaphysics, which gets separated more and more from the philosophy of language.

To put a label on it, we can call *the language–metaphysics gap* the alleged gap between facts about our language alone and facts about what reality in general is like. In particular, the alleged gap is supposed to block drawing conclusions about what reality in general is like from our language alone.[8] Although officially the gap is described as concerning language, it should be understood as concerning our representations in general, be they mental or linguistic. We cannot draw conclusions about what reality is like from our representations alone, be they mental or linguistic. I will in the following sometimes talk about concepts, which are in the ballpark of mental representations, and sometimes about words, phrases, or expressions, which belong to linguistic representations. But our general topic concerns both equally.

I should make clear and explicit that what is at issue is what conclusions we can draw from our representations *alone*. Uncontroversially, we can draw all kinds of conclusions about reality from facts about which ones of our sentences are true. The issue at hand is, instead, what conclusions about reality we can draw from our representations by themselves, with no regard to whether these representations represent accurately or truly. There is no obstacle in drawing conclusions about what reality is like from which representations are true. But there does seem to be a gap between facts about our representations alone and what reality is like. 'Our representations alone' here is to be understood as what our representations are like by themselves and what we aim to do with them, but leaving aside whether or not we succeed in what we aim

[8] Heather Dyke calls a similar principle 'the representational fallacy' in Dyke (2008).

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to do. And so understood, the gap seems to be legitimate: Simply from our attempts to represent reality one way or another we can draw no substantial conclusions about reality. The addition 'substantial' is important here. Since we are part of reality, there are some obvious conclusions about reality tied to us and to what we aim to do that can be drawn from our representations alone. But these would only concern a certain local part of reality, the part occupied by us and our minds. That is clearly legitimate, but also rather limited. Metaphysics is not focused on us and our minds, but on reality in general. Furthermore, 'substantial' is intended to demand more than merely analytic truths, if there are such truths. If some truths are analytic, then we might well be able to conclude such a truth from considerations about language alone. But even if there are such truths, few think that the debates of metaphysics are to be settled by analytic truths. Metaphysics concerns synthetic hypotheses about what reality in general is like.[9] And so understood there is no route from the philosophy of language to metaphysics, or so it seems.

Even if all this is correct, it wouldn't mean that the philosophy of language has no role to play in metaphysics. It can certainly still be helpful, even if it doesn't directly lead to any metaphysical insights about what reality in general is like. We should distinguish a *corrective* from a *constructive* role for the philosophy of language in metaphysics. Uncontroversially, I take it, the philosophy of language can help us avoid certain mistakes in metaphysics. For example, the philosopher of language can point out that a particular metaphysician is making a certain error in their reasoning tied to an unacknowledged scope ambiguity in one of their arguments. To point this out, and thereby to help the metaphysician avoid this error, is a real contribution to metaphysics. But it is only a corrective contribution, in the sense that it can help correct errors. The metaphysician relies on language in their theorizing and reasoning, and here insights into language can be helpful in avoiding errors. What is at issue in this paper is whether the philosophy of language can also make a constructive contribution to metaphysics: whether it can make a positive contribution to establishing what reality

[9] Obviously, there are exceptions to this picture, among them Frege (in Frege 1884) or Frank Jackson (in Jackson 2000).

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is like in general, not only a negative one by showing how certain metaphysicians made a mistake in their reasoning tied to language. Such a constructive, positive contribution from the philosophy of language, however, seems to be ruled out by the language–metaphysics gap.

The philosophy of language here appears to be on a par with a standard view of the role of epistemology in metaphysics. Epistemology can also have a corrective role: the epistemologist can point out that a particular proposal in metaphysics is badly supported by the cited evidence. But few would hold that epistemology can make a constructive contribution to metaphysics: that we can somehow conclude what reality in general is like from considerations tied to entitlement, warrant, evidence, and so on. Epistemology and the philosophy of language are thus focused on the theorist and their reliance of representations, evidence, and entitlement. That is important, but it falls short of a constructive contribution to metaphysics.

Of course, there are exceptions to this general picture. One could try to argue, for example, that a certain epistemic or linguistic fact wouldn't be possible unless a certain metaphysical fact obtains, and via such a connection one could try to argue that this metaphysical fact has to obtain, since the epistemic or linguistic fact obtains. This would make a constructive contribution to metaphysics via a connection to epistemology and the philosophy of language. But these would be unusual arguments in contemporary metaphysics. Most metaphysical theorizing does not proceed along those lines, and many would likely take such arguments to sow more doubt about the epistemic or linguistic facts than to establish the metaphysical facts via the claimed connection. Philosophy is never completely uniform, but the general point remains that it is generally seen as hopeless to make substantial progress about metaphysical issues via a constructive contribution from epistemology or the philosophy of language.

This picture thus leads to a certain separation of philosophical disciplines. Each of metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of language can have a corrective role in the other ones, but none seems to have a constructive role in the other ones. The metaphysician can point out that the philosophy of language is making a certain metaphysical mistake, say by confusing ontological categories in their semantic theorizing. But

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that alone doesn't make a positive contribution to how language in fact works, only a corrective one: how a certain way of conceiving of language is flawed. This separation of disciplines in turn affects much of how philosophical theorizing proceeds, and where these various philosophical subfields can turn to for insights related to their main questions. The philosophy of language obviously can turn to linguistics for insights, but it seems to have little to gain from connecting with metaphysics or epistemology.

In this paper I argue that all this is a mistake. The language–metaphysics gap is illusionary, and there indeed is a constructive role for both the philosophy of language as well as epistemology in metaphysics. Consequently these three disciplines are much more closely connected than is appreciated in the contemporary debate. In this paper I hope to make the case for this, in particular for the philosophy of language, but I will also outline how it is related to the constructive role of epistemology in metaphysics. To start, we should see how one can make a constructive contribution to metaphysics from the philosophy of language, and from thinking about our language alone. Once this has been motivated with an example we will be in a position to see how and why the language–metaphysics gap can be bridged.

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5.2 Bridging the gap

One could try to bridge the gap by first defending a particular philosophical theory, say a form of linguistic idealism which holds that reality is derivative of language somehow, and then rely on that theory to draw conclusions about reality from considerations about language alone. But any such attempt is only as good as the defense of the philosophical theory on which it relies. Not that it is obvious that this could not be done somehow, but I hope to make clear in this section that no such philosophical theory is required to bridge the language–metaphysics gap. The gap can be bridged straightforwardly, without relying on any substantial assumptions or any substantial philosophical theories. We can see straightforwardly that we sometimes indeed can draw significant, synthetic conclusions about reality merely by reflecting on our language

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alone. In this section I will give an example of this and then explain why and how such an example can work in light of the considerations given above that motivated that there is such a gap.

Let us consider the question whether or not natural numbers exist. This is a question about reality and what it contains. It is a question about what exists, not a question about language. And it is a question traditionally considered to be part of metaphysics, in particular of ontology. Nonetheless, I will argue, this question can be answered by considerations merely about our language alone. We can find an answer to this question about the world simply from thinking about what we do when we use language and what our language alone is like. Here is how this can go.

There is an old puzzle about the occurrence of number words in natural language, one that goes back to at least Frege (1884). In languages like English number words can appear in at least two quite different syntactic positions. On the one hand, they can appear like adjectives, determiners, or modifiers, as in

(1) Jupiter has four moons.

Here 'four' seems to be very similar to 'green' in 'Jupiter has green moons.' and thus like an adjective. On the other hand, number words can appear like names, as in

(2) The number of moons of Jupiter is four.

Here 'four' appears to be a name, just like 'Wagner' in 'The composer of Tannhäuser is Wagner'. These two syntactic occurrences normally come with two very different semantic functions. Names aim to refer to objects, but adjectives or determiners do not refer to objects, nor do they aim to do so; they modify nouns instead. The question is how number words can have both of these semantic functions in different occurrences, as well as why they can occupy these different syntactic positions. In essence there are two main lines to pursue, although they are not the only options. One is that number words are ultimately like adjectives, even when they sometimes appear to be names. On this line

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one will need to explain why number words appear to be like names in sentences like (2). There should be some syntactic explanation of why an adjective or determiner occupies this syntactic position that seems to be contrary to its basic syntactic category. Alternatively, one could argue that number words are ultimately names, even though they appear, for some reason or other, like adjectives in sentences like (1).[10] One option gives priority in some sense to number words as names, the other gives priority to number words as adjectives or determiners. Both of these options need to be spelled out more carefully, of course, including in what sense there is priority of one syntactic occurrence over the other. Maybe priority is to be understood as revealing how number words are in the lexicon, whereby the derivate occurrence of them is somehow understood as some syntactic derivation of a sentence where a number word appears in a position contrary to its lexical entry. We do not have to determine now how these options are best to be spelled out, and in principle all of them should be on the table.

Suppose then, just for the moment, that a fairly strict version of the 'adjectives first' line is correct: Number words are primarily like adjectives or determiners, but they appear syntactically like names for some syntactic reason or other. On this line, number words are syntactically displaced when they appear in sentences like (2). Which is to say that there is some syntactic reason why the number word appears like a name. That reason is a syntactic one: it primarily comes from syntax. Suppose in addition that the syntactic reason for the displacement of number words does not give them a completely new semantic function when they are so displaced. That this is so can be derivative of what the syntactic reason for displacement is. In particular, since adjectives do not aim to refer to objects, number words, when syntactically displaced, still do not aim to refer, even though they appear to be names on a first look. They do not acquire a new semantic function simply by being syntactically displaced.

Although determiners do not refer, they nonetheless have semantic values in a compositional semantic theory, and in a sense they can be seen as "denoting" those semantic values. This talk of denotation applies to any phrase, since all phrases will have semantic values, but it does not

[10] See Dummett (1991, 99ff.), where Michael Dummett discusses these two options.

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mean that all phrases are referential. Reference and "denotation" in this sense need to be distinguished. Every phrase has a semantic value, but they do not thereby refer to that semantic value. Furthermore, even referential phrases do not necessarily have their referents as their semantic values. In Montague's treatment of proper names such names have sets of properties as their semantic value, but they refer to people, not sets of properties. And furthermore, although every phrase has a semantic value, a sentence is not simply a sequence of referring expressions, each picking out some entity. On this picture it would hard to make sense of how such a sequence of referring expressions would give rise to truth conditions and propositional content. Instead, different phrases have different semantic functions: reference, predication, modification, etc., even though every phrase has a semantic value of some kind or other. To say that adjectives or determiners do not aim to refer does not involve claiming that they do not have semantic values, which they can be said to "denote", in this technical sense.

On this option of understanding what is going on with number words, they are syntactically displaced determiners or adjectives, and they do not have the function of referring even when they occur in a position that makes them appear to be a name. Whether or not this is indeed correct is a difficult question, of course, but for anyone it should be a live option. It is something that we could discover by investigating our own natural language and why it has the features that it has. What's more, I believe the position outlined is indeed the correct one, and I have argued for it in some more detail in Hofweber (2005), (2007), and, in particular, (2016). There I argued that there are at least two reasons why number words syntactically appear in singular term position, even though they are ultimately determiners. One of them is to achieve a focus effect, something we can see by observing how (1) and (2) interact differently with questions. The other is tied to a cognitive advantage in learning arithmetic. In the cited texts I also argued that this view generalizes to number terms more broadly understood, including expressions like 'the number four'.[11] All

[11] One way this could be is that 'the number' is in apposition to the bare number word 'four'. If 'four' is a non-referential displaced adjective or determiner in singular term position, then 'the number four' would derivatively also be non-referential, since an apposition does not turn a non-referential phrase into a referential one. For more, see Hofweber (2016, ch. 5).

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this would support that number terms in general are non-referential. And this we could figure out simply by thinking about our own language.

Whether or not this view is in the end correct is, of course, controversial and much beyond the scope of this paper. What matters for us here are two things: first, that this is a live option in the debate about how to understand number words in natural language, second, that we could discover that this is the correct option by thinking about our language alone. In particular, we can discover by thinking about our language alone that number terms are non-referential. To make this more explicit, let's distinguish two ways in which a phrase can be non-referential. One is paradigmatically exhibited by an empty name, like 'Betty Crocker'.[12] It is a name, and thus has the semantic function of reference: it aims to refer. But there is no such thing that the name refers to and so its semantic function goes unfulfilled. It aims to refer, but fails in its aim, and thus it is non-referential. We can call such names *de facto non-referential*. But there is also a second sense of being non-referential, which we can call being *constitutively non-referential*. It applies to expressions that do something completely different than referring semantically. They do not aim to refer, since they are not even in the business of reference. On most people's views, most expressions in natural language are like this: 'very', 'many', 'the', 'green', and so on are all constitutively non-referential. They have semantic values, and can be said to "denote" these semantic values, but they do not aim to refer to these semantic values nor to anything else.

Now, if number words are primarily adjectives or determiners, and if the explanation of why they nonetheless appear in the syntactic position of a name is a purely syntactic one, then number words, too, are constitutively non-referential. And if this view generalizes to number terms more broadly, then those, too, are constitutively non-referential. And we can see that they are constitutively non-referential from considerations about language alone. All the relevant questions tied to this are just about our language, not about the world in general. They are questions about why number words have these different syntactic

[12] 'Betty Crocker' is the name of a brand of food products, also used for a non-existent person who answers consumer questions and suggests recipes in advertisements.

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occurrences, what explains why number words can sometimes appear like determiners and sometimes like names, and so on. These are questions just about language alone. Similarly, whether an expression is non-referential in the second, constitutive sense, the sense in which adjectives and determiners are non-referential, is also just about language alone. It simply concerns what the semantic function of expressions of this type is, and whether they are even in the business of reference. This contrasts with the question whether expressions are non-referential in the first, de facto, sense, which is not about language alone. An empty name is only empty because two things happen: the name tries to refer, but the world does not cooperate and it thus fails to do what it tries to do. That concerns both language and the world, not just language alone. But that 'very' is non-referential can be seen by only thinking about language alone and what the semantic function of intensifiers like it is: They modify other expressions, but are not in the business of reference.

Taking all these points together we can now see that we can answer the worldly question about the existence of natural numbers simply from considerations about our own language alone. The key aspect of seeing this is to appreciate that if number terms are non-referential, then natural numbers do not exist. To see this, let's assume that number terms are constitutively non-referential. Consider all the things that exist and pick one of them out at random, say object *o*. Could it be that *o* is the number 4? Now, since number terms are non-referential in the very language I use here, that means that 'the number 4' in the last sentence is non-referential, especially non-referential in the constitutive sense. It does something other than refer, even though it can appear, for some reason or other, in the syntactic position of a name or a singular term. But when I ask whether *o* is the number 4, then I ask about the identity of the number 4 and some object *o*. But since 'the number 4' is non-referential, it in particular does not refer to *o*. And thus the identity statement that *o* is the number 4 can't be true. Thus whichever object I pick, it isn't the number 4. Thus no thing or object is the number 4, and therefore the number 4 does not exist. And the same now applies for all the other numbers as well. Since we can find out that number terms are non-referential in the constitutive sense by thinking about our own language alone, we can thus find out that none of the natural numbers

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exist: not the number 1, not the number 2, and so on.[13] We can draw this conclusion simply by thinking about our own language. This bridges the language–metaphysics gap. It gives us the result that natural numbers do not exist, something which is fully about reality and not at all about our language, from insights that are about our own language alone.

But how could this possibly work in light of what we have seen above? How could thinking about our language alone allow us to conclude something concerning the existence of numbers? How can that be, given that facts about language alone concern only us and our representations, whereas facts about numbers concern something totally different, not tied to language at all? The key to seeing how this is possible is to focus on the question we originally asked. We started our inquiry into reality, in particular the reality of numbers, by asking the question whether natural numbers exist. That question was stated in our language, naturally, and as such it involved our representations. We probe reality with those representations by asking a question about it, a question which determines the goalpost for that part of inquiry. We want to find the answer to that question, and with that we want to find the answer to something expressed with our representations. And that opens up the possibility that we can find out the answer to that question by reflecting on the representations used in the question itself. And this can be so even if the answer is not an analytic or conceptual truth, as it is not in our case. It is not a conceptual truth that natural numbers don't exist, but nonetheless a truth that can be discovered by thinking about our own representations. That number words are constitutively non-referential has to be established via linguistic investigation. It is not itself a conceptual truth that they are constitutively non-referential, but it is something that can in principle be established simply by thinking about our own language, assuming that it is indeed the correct view. As acknowledged above, I can't hope to defend this here, but I have done my best to do so in other work cited above. The point is that those conclusions were argued for purely by reflecting on our own language, with no regard to whether or not particular sentences in that language are true or correspond to

[13] This argument against the existence of natural numbers is discussed in more detail in Hofweber (2016, ch. 4).

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reality. And if these arguments are indeed successful, as I take them to be, then this would establish that numbers do not exist simply from considerations about our language alone. Thus such arguments are possible, we can bridge this gap, and by focusing on the question we originally asked we can see why and how this can be.

This supports that the philosophy of language has a constructive, not just a corrective, role in metaphysics. There are some questions of fact, questions traditionally thought to be part of metaphysics, that can be answered simply by thinking about our own representations alone. Thus thinking about our own representations alone can make a constructive contribution to our project of finding out what reality in general is like. It does not merely prevent us from faulty reasoning or making mistakes in metaphysics; it can directly answer a substantial question about what reality is like—for example, the question 'do natural numbers exist?' I should add that all this works quite straightforwardly, without relying on a special philosophical theory like linguistic idealism or a special view of metaphysics. It works within mainstream metaphysics and mainstream philosophy of language.

This, then, is my first main conclusion: we can sometimes answer questions about reality simply by reflecting on our own representations alone. And this points towards a constructive role of the philosophy of language in metaphysics. I say 'points' because it is not completely clear if this would truly establish such a constructive role, even if everything I said so far is perfectly correct. There are two concerns left that can result in some caution about there being a constructive role of the philosophy of language in metaphysics. The second half of this paper aims to present these concerns and at least outline some key ideas about how they can be overcome. To see how all this goes, let's first consider the concerns that remain and then see how these concerns can be overcome.

To appreciate these concerns, we can think about why what we have done so far might not be enough. We were able to bridge the language–metaphysics gap, since we focused on the question itself. We asked a question using our own language, and by thinking about the language we used we were able to answer the question we asked. But did we ask the right question? Or did we ask a bad, or even terrible, question? Maybe

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we were only able to answer the question we asked because the question we asked was defective somehow, and that defect was the reason why the answer could be determined by thinking about the language used in the question. But answering a defective question is not much reason to declare victory in metaphysics. Metaphysics does not just concern any old defective question; it at least concerns proper questions. And that is the first reservation: even if we answered the question we asked, the issue remains whether we asked the right question, and with it if we made real progress in metaphysics.

The second reservation is in a sense more general than the first: It is one thing to wonder whether we answered the right question, but quite another why we should give any special place to our questions at all. Why should we think that when we ask questions in our language, then this sets the proper target for what metaphysics has to achieve? Maybe our own language is so inadequate for metaphysics that none of our questions probe reality in the right way? Maybe the true target of metaphysics is not to answer one of our questions, but something quite different. We will need to discuss these two reservations in more detail before we can draw a conclusion about the place of the philosophy of language in metaphysics.

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5.3 Evaluating the question

Suppose that the position about number words and number terms outlined above is indeed correct for our natural language. And suppose further that this indeed allows us to answer the question whether natural numbers exist. Have we thereby made progress in metaphysics? This can be understood in an innocent way, where the answer is clearly yes, and in a more demand sense, in which the answer is unclear. Clearly we made progress in the sense that we found the answer to a question we had asked, a question that many considered to belong to metaphysics.[14] But

[14] There is, of course, another issue here concerning why this question should be seen as belonging to metaphysics, and not mathematics. A more detailed discussion of this issue is to be found in many places, including Carnap (1956), Schaffer (2009), and many more. My own take on this issue is in Hofweber (2016, ch. 1).

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did we make real progress in finding out what reality is like? Here there are two worries: One is that the result achieved is purely negative—numbers do not exist—which leaves open what does exist. In particular, it leaves open whether there are other things, things that are not numbers, but that are a lot like what some philosophers have thought numbers are: certain sets, or positions in an ω-sequence, or what have you. That there are no natural numbers does not rule out that there are those other things, although it does rule out that those other things are natural numbers even if they do exist. But this should not be the real worry to be hung up about. It might well be that the non-existence of numbers has lots of positive consequences for what reality is like, and establishing that they do not exist is only a first step in a more positive story of what reality is like. For example, it could be that the reason why we can see that natural numbers don't exist, the one coming from our own language, also gives us lots of positive insights into the philosophy of mathematics.[15]

The real worry should instead be this: we were able to establish, under the assumptions made, that the question 'Do natural numbers exist?' has a negative answer. The non-referentiality of number terms guarantees this. So we answered the question we had asked, but did we ask a good question to begin with? One concern here is that we might only have been able to answer the question as asked, since the relevant concepts or expressions involved in the question are defective in some sense. Maybe the concepts or expressions relied upon in it, in particular that of a natural number, are rather unsuitable for metaphysics. It might be that 'natural number' or 'the number four' is defective in some way, maybe tied to its being non-referential or maybe tied to something else. And it might be that because of this defect that we were able to answer a question that involved this expression. It was fine to answer the question we asked, but it would have been better to also know that we asked a good question, one properly suitable for metaphysics, involving more proper concepts. To put a label on it, we can call a *metaphysically shallow result* the correct answer to a question often considered to be part of

[15] I have developed such a more positive philosophy of arithmetic derivative on a study of number words in natural language in Hofweber (2016).

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metaphysics, with no regard to the quality of the question. We can call a *metaphysically deep result* the correct answer to the right question to ask in a particular part of metaphysics. Or better: the right question to ask relative to nearby alternatives. One doesn't have to ask the best overall question, just the best question in this neighborhood. Maybe the best question overall in ontology is why there is anything at all, and the best question in the neighborhood of the question whether natural numbers exist is the question whether there are positions in an ω-sequence. If so, then only that there are or aren't positions in ω-sequences is a deep result, but that there are no natural numbers is not. All this makes the following issue pressing: if we focus on the question we asked, and answer that question via reflection on our language alone, don't we also have to know that we answered the right question before we can claim to have made proper progress in metaphysics?

Another way to approach this issue is to note that so far we only talked about number words in English, but not how other human languages represent facts connected to numbers. Shouldn't we move to the study of how numbers are represented in human languages more generally, and not focus too much on English? What if the non-referentiality of number terms is a particular feature of English, and it is only in light of it that we drew the conclusion we drew? If other languages are substantially different than English in this regard we might well conclude that English is somehow defective here. But it is not so clear how we can make sense of this defect. After all, the question we asked was stated in English: do numbers exist? If it is at all possible that we can answer a question by reflecting on the representations used in that question, then it seems sufficient to reflect on English representations to answer an English question. Why do we need to consider all other human languages in doing this? But the worry must remain that maybe we didn't ask the best question we could have asked here, even if we answered the question we did ask. Maybe a different question in English, or a different question in a different language, would have been much more appropriate for metaphysics. And without answering this challenge it seems inappropriate to declare victory.

It might seem impossible to make progress here within the approach of finding answers to metaphysical questions by thinking about our

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language alone. How could we possibly know what the right question to ask is without antecedently knowing what reality is like? And how can we know what the best concepts are to employ in the question with which we probe reality, unless we already know what reality is like? In general, concepts are better if they fit reality better. To assess how good a concept is thus seems to require antecedent knowledge of what reality is like. That means in particular that it seems hopeless to try to evaluate the question we asked, and with it to evaluate the concepts we employed in that question, without first knowing what reality is like. And if that were so, then we would be doomed to at best achieve shallow results by thinking about our own representations, but never deep ones.

Nonetheless, there is a line of thought that seems to give hope that there can be progress in this regard after all. It supports that it might be possible to achieve deep results simply by thinking about our own representations, with no prior knowledge of what reality otherwise is like. The main idea of that line of thought is this: What if there are some concepts such that if one were to consider replacing one of them with a different one, then one is in a position to see that such a replacement would always be irrational, no matter what the alternative concept might be. So, when I am considering the reasons for and against switching from employing my old concept C, to some new alternative one C* instead, the reasons will always favor sticking with C rather than switching to C*. In other words, what if there are some concepts that can never rationally be given up in favor of an alternative one? Let's call a concept C *inescapable* just in case I can never rationally replace it with a different one, C*. It might seem dubious whether there are, or even could be, inescapable concepts. How could we rationally reject any proposed replacement of a given concept without even knowing what reality in general is like? But there are some possible candidates of such inescapable concepts nonetheless.

To consider one example, take thin normative concepts like 'ought'. We can imagine an alternative normative concept like ought*, which differs from ought in various ways, in particular that what one ought to do can be different than what one ought* to do.[16] Which one of these

[16] See Eklund (2017) for more on alternative normative concepts.

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normative concepts should I have? When I think about this, it is arguable that it would always be irrational for me to replace my own normative concept of ought with an alternative ought*. I can simply reason as follows: if I were to make the switch, then I would reason about what to do using the concept of ought* instead of that of ought. And if that reasoning were effective, then I would do what I ought* to do. But what I ought to do and what I ought* to do might come apart. Thus if I were to make the switch I might end up doing things which I ought not to do, even if I reasoned perfectly. But if I stuck with my old normative concept, then I would not be subject to this mistake. So I should not switch, which is to say: it would be irrational for me to switch.

Thin normative concepts are not the only ones that can be argued to be inescapable. Other candidates include logical concepts, the concepts of truth and fact, even the concept of natural number, and others. I have discussed inescapable concepts in much more detail in Hofweber (2023b) and (2023a), and this is not the place to get into them more. Inescapable concepts, if there are any, are relevant for our issue, because they allow us to assess whether a particular question we asked is the best one in its neighborhood, even without knowing what reality is otherwise like. If the concept of a natural number, say, is inescapable, then it is arguable that it would be irrational for me to think that asking about positions in ω-sequences is a better question to ask than asking about natural numbers. And so I should conclude that the question I did ask was the right question to ask here. And with it I should conclude that I used an appropriate language to ask the question I should have asked, even if other languages differ.

This points to that it is in principle possible to make progress on whether we are asking the right question in metaphysics, without first knowing what reality is like: we can sometimes, in certain special cases, find out that we did ask the right question originally, since in these cases we can see that if we replaced one of the concepts which prominently figure in the question with an alternative one, then we would not ask a better question. If the central concepts involved in a particular question are inescapable, then it would be irrational to replace them with alternative ones. As just mentioned above, this is discussed in more detail in Hofweber (2023b), where I present several arguments in more detail for

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particular concepts being inescapable. To be sure, this topic is only discussed here in the barest outline. Still, I hope that even in outline it points in a particular direction for how we can hope for deep results from reflecting on our own representations alone. And with it I hope it points to the fact that the philosophy of language can have a more substantial place in metaphysics than one might think. Not only can we sometimes answer questions of fact by thinking merely about the representations involved in these questions; we sometimes might even be in a position to conclude that we answered the right question, even though we don't antecedently know what reality is like.

5.4 Assessing the status of the question

Even if everything I said or outlined above is correct, the issue remains why we should give a special role to our questions in metaphysics at all. Why should we think that any of our questions have much to do with what metaphysics should in the end achieve? This might seem like a silly question at first, but I think it is well worth considering what is behind it.

There are really two ways of thinking about what metaphysics is supposed to do. The first gives a special role to one or more initial questions that we ask at the outset of the project. These questions can be broad, as in 'what is reality like in the most general ways?', or more specific, as in 'do natural numbers exist?' But in either case, the relevant question sets the goalpost for metaphysical inquiry. When we ask such questions we thereby set the goalpost for metaphysics. What we need to do is answer that very question. We can modify the initial question, and thereby move the goalpost, if we determine that we should have asked a better question instead. For example, we might conclude that we should not have used the concept 'natural number' in this question, but instead some other concept in its place. But even then, the goalpost is set, or moved, by our questions, articulated with our representations in our language. If this is the right approach to metaphysics, then the questions we ask with our representations have a special place in metaphysics: they set the goalpost for the project, and thereby articulate what metaphysics should aim to achieve.

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But that is not the only way to think of it. Alternatively, it could be that we don't set the goalpost for metaphysics with a question, but rather that the goalpost is already there, waiting for us to meet it. The goalpost is reality itself, and whatever questions we might ask, with whatever representations or concepts, is not central to what metaphysics is supposed to do. Metaphysics is supposed to capture reality, and it needs to do so using the concepts that reality itself demands for its best description. So understood, it can be that our present concepts and representations are completely inadequate for metaphysics. We might at present be unable to reach the goalpost that reality has set for us, since the representations so far available to us are completely inadequate for doing so. And we might not even be in a position to articulate what the goalpost is.

Let's call the *immanent stance* towards metaphysics the one where we take the goalpost to be set by our questions, and the *transcendent stance* the one that takes reality to come with a goalpost for metaphysics, one that has already been set. Whichever stance is the right one will have an impact on what we should think about there being a connection between metaphysics and our own representations of reality. If we set the goalpost for metaphysics with an initial question, formulated in our own language, then there is such a connection: the goal of metaphysics itself is set by a question formulated in our language. The immanent stance thus supports a connection between our language and metaphysics, whereas the transcendent stance does not directly. It leaves open that what metaphysics ultimately should do is something that has nothing to do with anything we can state in our present language, or even more extremely, not anything that can in principle be stated in human natural languages. That seems be a big difference between the two stances.

But, on the other hand, it might seem that these two stances are not all that different after all. Don't both agree that we need to capture reality, at least in its most general way? The immanent stance takes the goal to be to answer the question 'what is reality like?', whereas the transcendent stance takes the goalpost to be set by reality itself. But then don't both require that we describe reality, at least in the most general ways? Aren't the two stances ultimately the same? I think it would be a mistake to draw this conclusion. There is a real difference between the two stances. That they seem similar is ultimately an artifact of the fact that I need to

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use my language to describe the two stances, and when giving such a description they can seem similar. But the difference between them is a real one, one that doesn't depend on my particular description of them. Naturally, it is hard to describe the difference without the use of language, but we can point in the right direction nonetheless.

To make this clearer, we should distinguish two senses of what one might take reality to be. First, reality can be seen as the totality of facts: the totality of all that is the case. Second, reality can be seen as whatever the external thing is that determines the goalpost for metaphysics, and that demands a certain description involving particular concepts. Now, it could be that the concept of a fact is completely inadequate to capture what reality in the second sense is like. Maybe that concept is defective in some way, but it is hard for us, with our limited conceptual resources, to see this defect. Maybe it is the reliance on that-clauses to specify facts like the fact that snow is white. Maybe such that-clauses are required to be used by creatures like us, but this points to a defect in our minds and languages. If so, then aiming at reality as the totality of facts would miss the goalpost that reality as the external thing has set for us. The concept of a fact might be inadequate for metaphysics, but it might be hard for us to appreciate this, since we are bound to employ that-clauses in our language in key places. In this case the two stances would clearly come apart. And with it, on the transcendent stance, metaphysics might be a hopeless project for human beings: our minds might be inadequate to carry it out. But if the immanent stance is correct, then this won't be so. If the goalpost is to describe reality as the totality of facts in the most general way, then we are at least in principle in the business of getting there. We can represent what the goalpost is and at least some of the facts, although it remains to be seen whether we can represent and know about enough of the facts to get a general picture of what reality is like. But even if we can't reach the goalpost, at least we have a clear articulation of what it is, and that articulation can be given in our own language.

Which of these two stances is the correct one for metaphysics? It is not easy to settle this question, and I certainly can't hope to do so here. But there are some good reasons to favor the immanent stance. One worry about the transcendent stance is how reality as an external thing could by itself generate a demand to be described at all, and to be described using

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specific terminology on top of that. Why would such a demand have any force on us, and why would it even be a demand at all, directed at us or anyone else? Reality as the external thing by itself is simply there, and it is hard to see how it by itself can generate a legitimate demand for a description. But if we ask a question, if we probe reality in a certain way with a particular question, and if we thereby engage in inquiry with such an articulated goal, then it makes sense how this gives rise to a demand on us to describe the world in a particular way. This description is the answer to the question we ourselves posed and hoped to answer. And the demand applies to us, since it was us that asks the question and hopes to answer it. The demand is tied to reality, understood as the totality of facts, since we asked what it is like. So understood, the immanent stance can make sense of there being a goalpost at all. Still, not all philosophers would agree with this way of approaching the issue. I take Ted Sider's position in Sider (2011), for example, to adopt the transcendent stance, at least in spirit. This issue certainly deserves a more detailed discussion, but I hope highlighting the difference between the two stances, and the possible reasons for favoring the immanent stance. It at least makes sense of why it might be that asking a question, stated in our own language, has a special place in metaphysics in that it sets the goalpost for the project. This is the final part of the picture that gives the philosophy of language a central place in metaphysics.[17] It is now time to look at the whole picture, all put together.

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5.5 Immanent metaphysics and the status of language

The philosophy of language has a constructive role in metaphysics at least in the following sense: the questions we commonly ask in metaphysics can sometimes be answered merely by thinking about our own language, in particular the language used in these questions, even though the answer is not an analytic truth. Everyone can agree with this, and that this is so can be shown, for example, by answering the question whether or not natural numbers exist by showing that number terms are

[17] I defend the immanent stance as the correct one in more detail in Hofweber (2023a).

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constitutively non-referential. But whether this by itself is enough is not so clear. To take it to the next level we should also evaluate the question we asked, and give support to the status of our questions themselves. I outlined that we can hope to achieve deep results by showing that the central concepts in the questions we asked are inescapable. And I argued that we can justify the status of our questions by showing that the immanent stance towards metaphysics is the right one: the goalpost of metaphysics is set by our initial questions, and it is adjusted from there by posing new and better questions. But it is always tied to our questions, and thus to our own language. These last two steps certainly deserve closer attention than I was able to give them here, but I hope at least the idea has come into view concerning how we might not just answer the questions we happen to have asked, but the proper questions of metaphysics, simply by reflecting on our own language.

To be completely clear, no claim is made here or elsewhere that all of metaphysics can be carried out this way, nor that somehow thinking about language is *the* proper method for making progress in metaphysics. To the contrary, we should only expect this approach to work for a distinguished range of cases, ones where we ask questions involving certain especially central concepts, ones that we cannot rationally replace, and even then only when the situation is favorable enough so that the question we asked is indeed answerable by thinking about our own language, as is the case with the question about the existence of natural numbers.

We can say that *immanent metaphysics* is the part of metaphysics that hopes to find all the deep results that can be gotten this way. Immanent metaphysics thus hopes to answer questions involving inescapable concepts by reflecting on the language used in the question alone. Immanent metaphysics is based on the immanent stance, which takes our questions to set the goalpost for metaphysics. Immanent metaphysics then determines which synthetic truths are guaranteed by the representations used in these goalpost-setting questions, and whether it can be rational to take other questions to be an improvement. The results of immanent metaphysics can set a framework for the rest of metaphysics, and they essentially involve a constructive role for the philosophy of language, but not just the philosophy of language. To determine whether a

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particular concept can't rationally be replaced with a different one essentially concerns questions in epistemology. Thus not only does the philosophy of language have a constructive role in metaphysics, but so does epistemology.[18]

I would like to stress that this approach to the role of the philosophy of language in metaphysics is quite different than what Emmon Bach (1986) called 'natural language metaphysics' and what Friederike Moltmann (2017) called 'natural language ontology'. Those approaches concern uncovering the basic metaphysical categories and distinctions implicit in our representations of the world in language. These approaches do not directly concern the world, but only how the world is represented in our languages. There is much interesting work to be done concerning what kinds of central distinctions are involved in how we represent the world, what kind of things we represent the world as containing, and so on. But by itself none of this leads to insights into what the world is actually like. It only leads to insights into how we represent it to be. Bach is explicit in this limitation of his approach, for example when he memorably says, "It would be immoral of me as a linguist . . . to make claims one way or the other about whether or not these sorts of things correspond to real things in the world . . . or to nothing at all" (Bach 1986, 592). For the same sentiment, see also Pelletier (2011). Similarly, Strawson's 'descriptive metaphysics' in (1959) is simply focused on our own way of representing the world, not directly on what the world is like. Not that this is not of great interest, but these approaches essentially accept the language–metaphysics gap, and they need to be distinguished from immanent metaphysics. Immanent metaphysics is not focused on our way of representing the world, but on how the world is. But immanent metaphysics is based on our ability to overcome the language–metaphysics gap. It looks at language to find out what reality is like, which is its goal. Naturally, those who are in the grip of the language–metaphysics gap will think that immanent metaphysics is impossible: we can never find out what reality is like simply by thinking about our own ways of representing reality. But

[18] I have developed this view of the role of epistemology in metaphysics in more detail in Hofweber (2023b).

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I hope to have shown that this would be a mistake: the gap can be overcome, and it is possible in at least some cases to draw conclusions about reality simply by thinking about our own representations of reality. How much can be achieved with this approach, whether it truly leads to deep results, and whether we can defend the immanent stance over the transcendent one is left to be seen. It is thus fair to conclude that a good part of this paper is somewhat programmatic. But even so, the non-programmatic part of this paper should be enough to defend my main conclusion: the philosophy of language does have a constructive role in metaphysics, and the disciplines of the philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics are more closely connected than standard views on the relationship between these disciplines would have it.[19]

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[19] My thanks to Jeff Pelletier for his comments on an earlier draft.

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