

# Is metaphysics special?

Thomas Hofweber

August 1, 2019

## 1 What is the question?

The question whether metaphysics is special can be understood in a number of different ways. Being special involves an implicit contrast class: special compared to what? And being special involves an implicit dimension: special in what way? Thus there are many questions one might ask when one asks whether metaphysics is special. And metaphysics might be special in several of these ways: it might have the highest dropout rate among philosophy graduate students over 30. That would make it special with respect to dropout rate compared to other sub-disciplines in philosophy. But this is clearly not what is intended by the question as it would occur in a handbook on meta-metaphysics. I will focus on it being special in a way that gets at what has been a longstanding debate about the status of metaphysics. In this sense philosophers have long thought that metaphysics was special in one of two ways: either especially grand and glorious, or especially confused and problematic. Metaphysics could be special in a good way, or in a bad way. It could be special in some way compared to other parts of philosophy, or compared to other parts of inquiry in general. Philosophers have defended one or the other option throughout the history of philosophy, including to this day. Some have thought that metaphysics has a distinguished place in inquiry, one that gives it a special standing among all other parts of inquiry. Metaphysics is the queen of the sciences, the discipline that truly reveals what reality is like, our best guide to ultimate reality, and so on. Others have held that metaphysics is special in a purely negative way: especially confused, or misguided, a mere pretender among the sciences. On this line, metaphysics is not really a legitimate part of inquiry at all, but rather something like an outgrowth of an illegitimate attempt to try to find out what the world is like with pure speculation, while having the guts to claim that this is possible. Both of those attitudes have been around for a long time,

and it is hopeless and impossible to survey the history of the debate about whether metaphysics is special in a good or a bad way in this short article, and so I won't even attempt to do so. Instead of discussing the literature, I will highlight and discuss a few ways in which one might naturally think that metaphysics is special in the relevant senses. I will refer to a few publications that push a particular line discussed in the main text in more detail, but I can't hope to give anything like a survey of the literature. To get started, I will first introduce a little bit of terminology about how we should think of metaphysics and what it is supposed to do, and then look at whether metaphysics might be special in a glorious way, and finally whether it might be especially problematic or dubious.

## 2 Metaphysics

What metaphysics is supposed to do, if anything, is controversial, and I won't try to answer this question here. But even without having settled what metaphysics is supposed to do more precisely, we can nonetheless distinguish various aspects of what it might do. Most philosophers, even those critical of metaphysics and sympathetic to the idea that metaphysics is special in a bad way, do not think that there is nothing for metaphysics to do and that it should just go away. Many think that there is something useful for metaphysics to do, although they disagree on what that is. Some might think that although metaphysics itself does not rise to the status of a science or a real partner of the sciences in inquiry, it nonetheless has a useful auxiliary role to play: it might clarify concepts, or point to confusions, or raise problems that are not yet addressed in the sciences, and so on. Let us call *the task* of metaphysics whatever metaphysics is supposed to do. This leaves open whether metaphysics has a place in inquiry alongside the sciences, or possibly even above the sciences as their queen. Metaphysics would have a task if it has some job to do. And even anti-metaphysical philosophers often think that it has something to do, even if it isn't settling questions of fact, and thus has a task. The question remains whether that task is anything like the task of other parts of inquiry. Inquiry in general tries to find out what the world is like, what is true, and what the facts are. Does metaphysics do this as well?<sup>1</sup> If so, and thus if metaphysics properly should aim at determining what the world is like and which facts obtain, then we can

---

<sup>1</sup>Here we should more properly distinguish facts about what is the case, and other facts, like facts about what languages we should use, or what confusions we should avoid. Metaphysics, on the anti-metaphysical line, would only be concerned with facts of the latter kind, while the sciences are concerned with facts of the former. I will gloss over this

say that metaphysics as *a domain*. The domain of metaphysics are those facts that it should figure out whether they obtain. Or equivalently, the domain of metaphysics consists of those questions of fact that metaphysics should aim to answer. We can also call those *a question for metaphysics*. Biology has such a domain: the facts concerning living things, or something near enough. Physics has a domain, and so on. Does metaphysics have one too? If so, which facts or which kinds of facts are in it? One straightforward answer is that metaphysics has a domain and that its domain is captured by the question: what is reality like? This is fair enough, but it also could be seen as the answer that any other part of inquiry could also give. Biology could take its domain to be articulated by the question what reality is like, with special emphasis on living things, and so on. Everyone who engages in inquiry ultimately has reality in mind and ultimately wants to find out what it is like. So, even if metaphysics has a domain, the next question is whether it has *its own domain*: some facts that metaphysics in particular is supposed to investigate, or some questions of fact that are properly addressed by metaphysics and especially metaphysics. If metaphysics has its own domain the issue will be what distinguishes the facts in its domain from those in other domains and how do they all relate to each other to form one totality of facts.

Besides the issue of the task of metaphysics and the domain of metaphysics, there is the question of the method of metaphysics. Are the questions in the domain of metaphysics to be addressed with a distinct method, one that applies to metaphysics, but not to other parts of inquiry? Or are the methods of metaphysics the same as those properly employed in other parts of inquiry?

Metaphysics could be special with regard to all three of these things: the task, the domain, or the method. It could be that the task of metaphysics is rather different than the task of other parts of inquiry, be it other parts of philosophy more narrowly or other parts of inquiry more broadly. Maybe what metaphysics is supposed to do is very different, or rather similar, to what philosophy in general, or science in general, is supposed to do. It could be that the domain of metaphysics, if there is one, is rather similar or rather different than the domains of other parts of inquiry. Maybe metaphysics aims at a distinct class of facts, or maybe it is just concerned with the same kinds of facts as the sciences, but possibly in a more general or abstract way? And it could be that the methods of metaphysics are rather similar or rather different than the methods employed in the sciences. Maybe metaphysics

---

in the following.

tries to find out what reality is like a priori, and the sciences try to do the same a posteriori? Any one of these ways might make metaphysics special, and we should now look more closely at how one might think that metaphysics is special, be it in a good way or a bad way.

### **3 Is metaphysics especially glorious?**

There is a long tradition within philosophy to give metaphysics a special status among all the sciences. This tradition holds that metaphysics is glorious: it is in the business of fact-finding, and it has a special role in that business overall. Not only does metaphysics have a domain, and thus some facts to investigate, just like biology or other sciences, but metaphysics has a special place among all fact finding parts of inquiry. I want to consider two ways in which this might be: first, metaphysics is special, since the facts in its domain are more central than the facts in any other domain, for example because all other domains depend on metaphysics somehow. Second, metaphysics is special, since the facts in its domain are the most revealing of reality: they show what reality is really or ultimately like. Either way, metaphysics would be especially glorious. It could be the queen of the sciences, or the true revealer of reality. We will look at them in turn.

#### **3.1 Metaphysics as the queen of the sciences**

To think of metaphysics as the queen of the science can be motivated in at least two main ways: metaphysics as the great unifier, and metaphysics as the discharger of presuppositions. On the first, metaphysics, or a related larger part of philosophy, is seen to unify the results of the other sciences in a way that none of the other sciences do, but that is required to bring all of science together. Only in metaphysics do we see the larger picture of what reality is like, although smaller parts of this picture are painted in the individual sciences. Metaphysics is central hub where all the pieces are being put together. The sciences each deliver their results to this hub, and philosophy and metaphysics put them all together into one overall picture of reality, possibly with some additions and augmentations. So understood, metaphysics has a domain and it has its own domain: it concerns certain large scale facts about how the different domains investigated in the particular sciences come together and relate to each other. Metaphysics thus has a special place in inquiry, it is the central place where the puzzle pieces are being put together.

This picture, however, is rather problematic, both regarding science as well as metaphysics. It isn't the case the individual sciences merely locally look at their areas with no regard to what is going on elsewhere. Science itself is not that local, and although no single science has as its domain the totality of facts, all sciences have the totality of facts in mind, at least implicitly, and how their domains relate to other domains, in particular nearby ones. In addition, metaphysics as it is commonly practiced is not at all like gathering facts from various sciences and putting them together into one picture. Some aspects of metaphysics are certainly related to this issue and to how the different sciences relate to each other (when considering questions of emergence, for example), but metaphysics in general is not like that. Just think of any one of the standard metaphysical problems: freedom of the will, the ontology of numbers, essence and modality, and so on. It would be hard to see what to do with these areas of metaphysics if one held that the domain of metaphysics concerns facts about unifying the sciences.

A second attempt to give metaphysics a special status among all parts of inquiry, and to support the "queen of the sciences" metaphor, is to think of metaphysics as the discharger of presuppositions, and the discipline that puts the sciences on a firm footing. To illustrate this approach, consider questions about change in science and in metaphysics. The sciences try to find out, amongst other things, how things change over time: the dynamical laws of physics, the evolution of species, the change of materials under pressure, and so on. But, the argument goes, the sciences simply presuppose that change is possible at all, and then aim to determine what changes happen, given this presupposition. This assumption that change is possible at all is an assumption made at the outset, an assumption that is never cashed in within the sciences. Without cashing it in the results of the sciences are only conditional: if change is possible at all then things change this way. And this is where metaphysics comes in: it shows how change is possible at all, and with showing this, metaphysics puts the sciences on solid ground. It takes the queen of the sciences to establish unconditional versions of the results of the sciences. The sciences depend on metaphysics for having unconditional results, and only metaphysics can help the sciences to achieve them. The special domain of metaphysics so understood can thus be seen as facts about what is possible: the possibility of change, the possibility of time, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

But is it true that the sciences simply assume that change is possible at all, and then do their work conditional on this assumption? An alternative

---

<sup>2</sup>A position of this kind is defended by E.J. Lowe in [Lowe, 1998].

way of looking at it is that the sciences establish various results, including things like that the polar ice caps are melting, and that these results imply that things change and that change is thus possible. Why think that the possibility of change is assumed or presupposed by the sciences, rather than implied by their results? To compare the situation to a simpler case: the sciences have found out that pure plutonium is silvery-gray in color. Did they assume or presuppose that it is colored at all, and then, under that assumption, establish that it has that particular color? Or did they establish empirically what the color is, and then conclude from that that it is colored at all? In that case I would think that it is the latter. That pure plutonium, something never observed before 1940 or so, has a color at all might be an open question, although, of course, it is reasonable to predict that it is not translucent. But was it assumed or presupposed that it has a color, or established empirically, by seeing that it is silvery-gray? Again, the latter. And so it seems with change. That things change in the world was established empirically, although maybe not with certainty, but nonetheless similarly as most other things are established empirically. If so, then the results of the sciences hold unconditionally, although not with certainty, and they do not need final vindication from philosophy and metaphysics. Thus it can seem rather dubious to try to establish that metaphysics is the queen of the sciences along those lines.

Overall then, to hold that metaphysics is special among other parts of inquiry in a glorious way, since it is the queen of the sciences, is not an easy line to defend.

### **3.2 Metaphysics as the true revealer of reality**

Another way in which metaphysics might be special in a glorious way is that it might go deeper than the sciences. The sciences uncover what reality is like, what is true and what is the case. But metaphysics goes further. There are different ways of trying to articulate how it goes further, with some prominent options including the following: Metaphysics tries to find out what reality is ultimately like, what fundamental reality is like, what is ultimately true, or what is true in reality. This, so the proposal, is especially revealing of reality. To pick just one example how this might go, the sciences might give a description of the empirical world: what is in it, how it changes, etc.. Metaphysics, on top of that, might determine that ultimately empirical things are ideas in the mind of God, or bundles or tropes, or what have you. This would not conflict with the sciences, but add another level of

description to what reality is like. And that level is in a sense the deepest one, one that shows what really is the case, behind the appearances, or what reality is fundamentally like, or something similar. Metaphysics is special in this sense, since it uncovers a description of reality that is most revealing, or at least more revealing than those of the sciences. It does not merely describe the appearances, but uncovers what reality is ultimately like.

This way of taking metaphysics to be special relies on a distinction between what is the case and what is ultimately the case, or a similar version of it. Can this distinction be made sense of? There are several distinctions in the neighborhood that do make sense, but that won't help here. For example, there clearly is a legitimate distinction between what seems to be the case and what is the case. This is the distinction between appearances and reality, understood in a particular way: how reality appears to us, and how it in the end is. But so understood the distinction does not help carve out a special place for metaphysics, since the sciences clearly aim to find out how things are, not just how they appear to be. This alone won't help.

But maybe there is a different way of understanding something like the appearance-reality distinction, or the distinction between a more superficial and a deeper description of reality. And maybe metaphysics can claim for itself the deeper description as its domain. But what is this distinction? And why should we think that the level that belongs to metaphysics is deeper or more revealing than the one that belongs to the sciences, however the distinction is drawn? There are two main ways to try to approach this: one is to hold that there is a primitive notion of being 'ultimate' or 'really' or 'reality', a notion that can't be defined or spelled out, but that we grasp and can make sense of. Using this notion one can then distinguish what is true from what is really true or ultimately true or true in reality. On such an approach it might then be a primitive, unexplained insight that what is ultimately true is deserving of greater attention and is more revealing than what is merely true. Second, one could hold that such a notion can be spelled out, propose a way to spell it out, and then explain why so spelled out the ultimately true is special. Both approaches face serious obstacles, although versions of both approaches are popular in metaphysics. The first approach was championed in recent work by Kit Fine, in particular [Fine, 2001], who argues that we need to assume a notion of *reality* in metaphysics, and that this notion should be accepted even if it cannot be spelled out any further. In particular, this notion of reality is to be contrasted with an ordinary, naive notion of reality, where reality contrasts with fiction or things that are not the case. Instead, what is true in reality, in Fine's sense, contrasts in particular with what is merely true, not only with what is false. What is

true in reality is of special concern for metaphysics, maybe even the distinct domain of metaphysics, whereas the sciences primarily aim at what is true. But do we have a grasp of such a metaphysical notion of reality, and do we understand when we ask about what is true in reality, as opposed to what is merely true? This way of understanding the domain of metaphysics, as concerning what is ultimately the case, opens itself up to a common criticism of metaphysics, one that is connected to the position that metaphysics is special in a problematic way. This criticism will be discussed in more detail below, and it concerns that metaphysical questions rely on meaningless expressions, and the project of metaphysics is based on an illusion of meaning. Whether this criticism applies here is, of course, not clear so far. Nonetheless, it might seem suspicious that we would have a primitive notion of reality or being ultimately the case, where this notion is distinct to metaphysics. If metaphysics concerns what is true in metaphysical reality, and that notion can't be spelled out or explained to others, then this can give rise to the suspicion that metaphysics is an esoteric discipline: you need to be a metaphysician to know what the discipline is even supposed to be about.

The second option, to spell out the relevant notions of metaphysical reality or being ultimately the case, has a different set of problems. Although many attempts have been made to get clearer on what such a distinction might be

One could try to say what being ultimately the case consists in. And there are several options that one could pursue: maybe it consists in being fundamental in some sense, or being a supervenience base for the rest, or being a final truth-maker of other truths, or something along those lines. But in general one faces a dilemma in such attempts at making these notions explicit: either they are too weak and not distinctly metaphysical enough to do the work they are intended for, or they rely on other primitive metaphysical notions that are just as problematic as the notion of metaphysical reality or being ultimately the case. The former horn of the dilemma is widely seen to apply to attempts that heavily rely on the notion of supervenience. Although this notion can be defined precisely in several different ways, relying on modal notions, like what is necessarily the case, the result is often considered weak and unsuitable to carve out a domain for metaphysics with proper significance. To spell out a notion like metaphysical reality that is suitable to give metaphysics a special place can easily push one into the first horn of our main dilemma, since such attempts could rely on a primitive metaphysical notion that is just as problematic as a primitive notion of metaphysical reality. For example, the proposal that metaphysical reality is



the totality of all facts that give the *ultimate* explanation of the other facts is in danger of being in that position, unless it is made clear what ultimate explanation is and how it relates to just plain old explanation. If it is taken to be a primitive kind of metaphysical explanation then little progress would have been made. And similar worries apply to the other options one has, relying on notions like fundamentality, reality, grounding, and so on.

Whether the relevant notion of, for example, being ultimately the case is primitive or can be spelled out or not, it remains unclear why what is ultimately the case is more revealing than what is the case. Simply because we use the grand sounding word ‘ultimately’ for this notion does not thereby give it special significance. Anyone who holds that metaphysics is especially glorious in this way will have some work to do to motivate this claim for specialness. Why should we especially care and attach special value to what is ultimately the case? There are some clear strategies that might answer this: what is ultimately the case is tied to what is fundamental, which is tied to what explains the rest, and there is value in explanation. And similarly for other attempts that spell out being ultimately the case. But it is not clear how such an account would work for a primitive notion of being ultimately the case, and it is not clear if it would work even if it is spelled out in terms of fundamentality and explanation, since the relevant notion of fundamentality and explanation might be of a distinctly metaphysical kind, one that isn’t obviously tied to fundamentality and explanation as it is used in the sciences. All these issues deserve further and much more detailed discussion and they have been widely discussed in the literature.<sup>3</sup> But overall we can say that it is not clear whether metaphysics is especially glorious, since it is the true revealer of reality.

## 4 Is metaphysics especially problematic?

There is a long tradition in philosophy to think that there is something profoundly wrong with metaphysics. There is no single reason why metaphysics seems to be especially problematic, but there are two that stand out: worries about meaning and worries about epistemology. On the former the charge is that metaphysics relies on terminology that is not fully meaningful or that

---

<sup>3</sup>The literature on these issues is vast, and hopefully other chapters in this handbook discuss some of it in more detail. Still, here is a small selection of relevant work: For a defense of a place of a primitive notion of reality in metaphysics, see [Fine, 2001] and [Fine, 2005]. For another primitivist version, see [Sider, 2011]. For criticism of such approaches, see chapter 13 of [Hofweber, 2016] and [Dasgupta, 2018]. For a discussion of supervenience, see [Kim, 1993]. For truth-making, see [Cameron, 2008].

is falsely taken to have a different meaning when used in metaphysics than it normally has. On the latter, epistemological worry, metaphysics is charged to be pure speculation, with no basis for settling the questions it wants to answer one way or another. We will look at them in turn.

#### 4.1 Metaphysics as the babbler in the meaningless

Metaphysics can be seen as often making meaningless or semantically confused assertions, and as an attempt to answer not well-defined questions. The suspicion that there is a deep confusion about meaning at the heart of many metaphysical projects can be supported by a more careful look at some of the assertions that metaphysicians are hoping to make. This can range from criticizing particular sentences, like the famous ‘The nothing nothings’ example, to criticizing the central reliance on expressions like ‘ultimately’, ‘really’, or ‘fundamentally’, as used above, where metaphysics was understood as being concerned with what is ultimately the case. Furthermore, one might argue that a particular feature of metaphysical assertions, namely that it is not clear how they could be tested or verified empirically, shows that these assertions are devoid of meaning, since all meaning must be tied to experience and verification. Such a criticism of metaphysics, which is based on some general criterion of being meaningful, might seem rather dated these days, although it was prominent during the days of logical positivism. But the more general worry remains without such a criterion. For example, one might point to a pattern in how metaphysical projects are motivated that can be accused of relying on a confusion about meaning. Here is one example how this can go.

In the debate about the ontology of numbers there is a standard motivation for the significance of this project that comes from thinking about mathematics as a whole and from the outside. Does mathematics aim to describe a part of reality which is there independently of our mathematical practice, or is it a game with certain rules that we carry out as we go along? Is mathematics discovery or invention, etc.? One way to support the discovery side is to claim that there is an ontology of mathematical objects, things which exist and which are talked about in mathematics. This side accepts a certain picture of mathematics as describing parts of reality, and in particular that there are these parts which are described this way. So, this side accepts the existence of mathematical objects, objects like numbers, functions, and so on. And there being such objects is a central part of this picture. So, one might think that the question whether there are such mathematical objects is a great candidate for being in the domain of metaphysics.

It seems to be just the kind of question that pushes you metaphysically one way if answered one way, and another way if answered another.

But this is problematic since it sure seems that the question whether there are numbers and functions is settled within mathematics itself. Many theorems of mathematics imply that there are numbers and functions. And thus they imply that there are mathematical objects. Mathematics itself has shown that there are infinitely many prime numbers, so there are infinitely many numbers, so there are numbers. But this is not how it was supposed to go. The question whether there are numbers was supposed to be a question that is central to understanding mathematics from the outside, a question that divides two main sides of how mathematics as a whole is supposed to be understood philosophically. It was supposed to be a metaphysical question, one about the ontology of numbers and one in the domain of metaphysics not in the domain of mathematics.

This shows, so the objection to this project, that metaphysics makes a confusion about meaning. It hopes to ask a question with certain grand metaphysical features, and it articulates the question in a particular way ('Are there numbers?'), but that question with that meaning doesn't seem to have any of the grand features. Instead of a grand metaphysical question the metaphysician asked a trivial mathematical question. They were simply confused about this, maybe hoping that the question they were aiming to ask is a different question than the trivial mathematical one, but this hope is futile. The metaphysical project is thus confused, and the confusion is one about meaning. The question the metaphysician is asking is trivial, not deep.<sup>4</sup>

Similar criticisms can be brought up against many other metaphysical projects. Are we free? Are there tables? And so on. In each case there are some ordinary meanings associated with the relevant words 'free' and 'table', and with those meanings it is trivial that we are free and that there are tables. What the metaphysician is trying to do is to ask other, nontrivial questions with those same words, but there are no other questions in the neighborhood here. The project of metaphysics is, or is largely, based on a confusion about meaning, or so the worry.

If this is to be accepted then metaphysics would not have a domain in the above sense, but it might still have a task. Its task might well be understood as unearthing these misuses of language and making sure that

---

<sup>4</sup>A famous objection to metaphysics along those lines is due to Rudolf Carnap in [Carnap, 1956]. A contemporary version is defended by Amie Thomasson, in particular in [Thomasson, 2015].

they do not happen any more. Metaphysics thus turns away from reality, and focuses on language, and the confusions that arise from language. The task so understood can be largely critical, making sure no further errors happen, or more constructive, proposing a better language that is less likely to lead to confusion. Either way, metaphysics is far from the queen of the science, and in fact not a real part of inquiry at all.

How should one assess this situation? One reaction can simply be that metaphysics does not have its own domain. It asked a question — are there numbers? — which is answered in mathematics: yes. Similarly, metaphysics might ask some general questions about the material world, and those questions are then answered in the sciences. Metaphysics would thus be more in the business of asking questions than answering them, and it would ask very general questions, maybe too general, or too trivial, for the sciences themselves to ask. But if this is all there is to metaphysics, this would certainly warrant seeing it in a negative light and not an equal partner in inquiry. But there are also other options.

First there is an issue about whether we are asking the same question when we ask whether there are numbers in mathematics and in metaphysics. Although it is natural to express the question in each case with the words ‘Are there numbers?’, it is not clear that these utterances of those words express the same question. This general possibility should be clear, since in many other, ordinary, cases the same words can be used to ask different questions. The issue is whether this indeed applies here as well. One could get a ring of a difference when one considers that normally when asking this questions one is after examples. So, when I ask ‘Are there prime numbers between 10 and 15?’ I ideally want to have an example of such a prime number as an answer. But when I ask whether there are numbers in metaphysics then I am not satisfied with an example of a number, but I am asking about what kinds of things exist, what the world is made from, or something along those lines. The question remains why uttering these words in these different situations leads to different questions. How does this difference arise from those words? Are some of them ambiguous or polysemous? Is this difference tied to philosophy, or does it arise in ordinary communication and then lead to a philosophically significant consequence? These are not easy questions to answer, but it should be clear that the general possibility of two questions expressed with the same words should be considered an option.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>I have defended this answer in [Hofweber, 2005] and in particular [Hofweber, 2016].

Second, there is an issue about whether the metaphysical question was properly expressed with the words ‘Are there numbers?’ Maybe, contrary to the proposal just discussed, those words can only be used properly to ask one and the same question, but the question we wanted to ask in metaphysics is not the one expressed in those words. Instead, the question properly articulated should be loaded up with more words, including more metaphysical terminology. So, the mathematical question might well be “are there prime numbers between 10 and 15?” and with it “are there numbers?”, both of which have a trivial affirmative answer. But the metaphysical question instead is “are numbers among the fundamental things?” or “are numbers real?” or “are there really numbers?” or “are numbers part of reality?” So understood asking the metaphysical question is not making a confusion about language. The only confusion was to articulate the metaphysical question incorrectly as “are there numbers?” That confusion, the proposal goes, can be overcome quite easily: just ask the better articulated question instead. All one would have to explain is why we articulated the question we wanted to ask in this incorrect way.

Just as the proposal discussed above about metaphysics being the true revealer of reality, this proposal faces a similar worry. To repeat a question discussed in some more detail above, how is the distinction between there being numbers and there being numbers in reality to be understood? After all, anyone who thinks that there are numbers would think that they are part of reality. What else would they be part of? This is not to say that such a distinction cannot be drawn, but certainly more needs to be said.<sup>6</sup>

Overall then it is not so clear whether metaphysics is especially problematic, since it is based on a confusion about meaning.

## 4.2 Metaphysics as unjustified speculation

Even if metaphysical theses and questions are fully meaningful, a worry remains that attempting to answer them is pure speculation, carried out on the basis of vastly insufficient evidence. As such, metaphysics is highly problematic, as it attempts to answer questions that we are in no position to answer, not just now, but in principle. Let me illustrate this issue with

---

There I argue that the two readings of the question arise from two functions that polysemous quantifiers have in ordinary communication and that the affirmative answer to the mathematical question does not answer the metaphysical question.

<sup>6</sup>And, of course, more has been said, for example in [Schaffer, 2009], [Fine, 2009], and many others.

the debate about the existence of ordinary objects. Consider the question about composition: do the particles that are arranged like a table compose a table? That is, is there simply an array of particles, and nothing else, or is there a table in addition to the particles? Suppose, as many, but not all in this debate think, that there is a real, meaningful, and non-trivial question about whether there is a table in addition to the particles arranged table-wise. How could we tell the difference? One attempt to answer it is to insist that one can see the table. But would things not look exactly the same to us if there was no table, but only particles arranged table-wise? In both cases, one might insist, would I form the belief that there is a table, but only in one of them would this belief be true. We seem to see a table, but we can't tell by just opening our eyes whether this seeming is correct, or so the argument. But then, how else could we decide? Could science decide it? Do we have evidence from science that there is a table? It might seem that it would be question begging to describe the evidence in terms of ordinary objects, as evidence that the table is this heavy, or the like. Why not describe it as evidence that the particles arranged table-wise are collectively this heavy? Maybe the issue thus can't be settled empirically. That doesn't mean it can't be settled. There are numerous other considerations that could come into play. One set of arguments is that one side or the other is not coherent: tables are incoherent, somehow, or just particles arranged table-wise with no composition of tables is incoherent. But this seems pretty tough to defend, and I won't try to pursue it. Instead it is more popular to focus on considerations about theoretical virtues: by considerations concerning simplicity or fruitfulness or parsimony or the like can we see that one side is better than the other. No tables leads to a simpler or more parsimonious theory, and so we should favor that composition does not occur. Or tables leads to a more fruitful theory, and so we should favor composition occurring. But this puts all the weight and all the sources of evidence on theoretical virtues. How much weight can we really give theoretical virtues alone, and how much of their appeal comes from our desire for simplicity and parsimony for practical reasons, rather than there being any grounds that the world is simple and parsimonious. In light of this one might conclude that the whole debate is pointless, not because the question is meaningless, but because the answer is too elusive.

This line of reasoning can be challenged in numerous ways. First, it is not at all clear that we do not have empirical evidence for the existence of tables, and thus for the occurring of composition. That perception presents the world to me in terms of objects might well be evidence for them, even if I

would have this belief falsely in cases where there are no objects like tables, but only particles. There is a further issue about whether the evidence we originally have gets defeated in light of metaphysical considerations, and thus the evidence goes away in light of further thought. Either way, the issue is there whether we do have such evidence, and the answer is not completely clear.<sup>7</sup> Second, it is unclear whether considerations about theoretical virtues alone carry much weight without the addition of other evidence. Maybe metaphysical considerations are closely tied to overall theoretical virtues in purely non-empirical theorizing. That should not be taken as a bad thing, or something that shows that metaphysics is pointless, but instead as a somewhat distinctive methodology of metaphysics: relying on theoretical virtues alone.<sup>8</sup>

These issues naturally do not only arise for the debate about composition. Many other debates can be understood along similar lines: the evidence that is being presented for one view or the other is one largely about which overall picture makes the most sense and is the easiest to digest. But the considerations brought in up in favor of one side over the other can be seen as not presenting evidence or giving reasons, but rather as expressing a desire or preference: this would be simpler, and thus preferable, that would be more appealing to us in some other way, and thus preferable, etc.. But pointing to the truth is another matter, and here, the worry goes, we have little to show for. If considerations in metaphysics indeed were of this kind, and if the theoretical virtues are not themselves to be taken as reasons for truth then maybe there is little left of metaphysics. But whether this is indeed so is far from clear. Thinking of metaphysics as purely being based on theoretical virtues is not exactly plausible as a reconstruction of actual metaphysical debates, and thinking of theoretical virtues as merely expressions of wishful thinking is not exactly how theoretical virtues are relied on in other parts of inquiry.

Thus overall we can say that here, as in all of our other cases before, it is not clear which side in this debate is correct.

---

<sup>7</sup>See [Merricks, 2001] for an argument that the evidence gets defeated, and [Hofweber, 2016] for an argument that it does not.

<sup>8</sup>See [Sider, 2013] for more on theoretical virtues in the debate about composition, [Korman, 2015] for more about objects in general, and [Bennett, 2009] for a defense that the issue is elusive and [Bennett, 2016] for an argument that metaphysics is not distinctly different than other parts of philosophy.

## 5 Conclusion

Whether metaphysics is special, either when compared to the natural sciences or to other parts of philosophy is unclear and subject to a longstanding and ongoing debate and discussion. Much of this debate concerns the nature of metaphysics and how it compares to other parts of inquiry with respect to its task, domain, and method. As was the case throughout the history of philosophy, to the best of my knowledge, so is the case these days that some philosophers take metaphysics to be special in a negative way, and others take it to be special in a positive way. Although much progress has been made in this debate, and many of the positions have been developed and defended in much greater detail and with much force, the debate is ongoing and it seems fair to say that nothing resembling consensus on the special status of metaphysics has been reached.



## References

- [Bennett, 2009] Bennett, K. (2009). Composition, coincidence, and metaontology. In Chalmers, D., Manley, D., and Wasserman, R., editors, *Metametaphysics: new essays on the foundations of ontology*, pages 38–76. Oxford University Press.
- [Bennett, 2016] Bennett, K. (2016). There is no special problem with metaphysics. *Philosophical Studies*, 173:21–37.
- [Cameron, 2008] Cameron, R. (2008). Truthmakers and ontological commitment: or how to deal with complex objects and mathematical ontology without getting into trouble. *Philosophical Studies*, 140:1–18.
- [Carnap, 1956] Carnap, R. (1956). Empiricism, semantics, and ontology. In *Meaning and Necessity*, pages 205–221. University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition.
- [Dasgupta, 2018] Dasgupta, S. (2018). Realism and the absence of value. *Philosophical Review*, 127(3):279–322.
- [Fine, 2001] Fine, K. (2001). The question of realism. *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 1(1):1–30.
- [Fine, 2005] Fine, K. (2005). Tense and reality. In *Modality and Tense*, pages 261–320. Oxford University Press.
- [Fine, 2009] Fine, K. (2009). The question of ontology. In Chalmers, D., Manley, D., and Wasserman, R., editors, *Metametaphysics: new essays on the foundations of ontology*, pages 157 – 177. Oxford University Press.
- [Hofweber, 2005] Hofweber, T. (2005). A puzzle about ontology. *Noûs*, 39:256–283.
- [Hofweber, 2016] Hofweber, T. (2016). *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- [Kim, 1993] Kim, J. (1993). Concepts of supervenience. In *Supervenience and Mind*, pages 53–78. Cambridge University Press.
- [Korman, 2015] Korman, D. (2015). *Objects: nothing out of the ordinary*. Oxford University Press.
- [Lowe, 1998] Lowe, E. J. (1998). *The Possibility of Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press.

- [Merricks, 2001] Merricks, T. (2001). *Objects and Persons*. Oxford University Press.
- [Schaffer, 2009] Schaffer, J. (2009). On what grounds what. In Chalmers, D., Manley, D., and Wasserman, R., editors, *Metametaphysics*, pages 347–383. Oxford University Press.
- [Sider, 2011] Sider, T. (2011). *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford University Press.
- [Sider, 2013] Sider, T. (2013). Against parthood. In Bennett, K. and Zimmerman, D., editors, *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, volume 8, pages 237–293. Oxford University Press.
- [Thomasson, 2015] Thomasson, A. L. (2015). *Ontology made Easy*. Oxford University Press.