

There is no special problem with metaphysics

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Abstract I argue for the claim in the title. Along the way, I also address an independently interesting question: what is metaphysics, anyway? I think that the typical characterizations of metaphysics are inadequate, that a better one is available, and that the better one helps explain why metaphysics is no more problematic than the rest of philosophy.

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In an earlier paper, I claimed that “there is little reason to think that there is some characteristic problem that afflicts all and only metaphysics,” and that the idea that “there is something *special* wrong” with metaphysics “requires taking the somewhat arbitrary boundaries between subdisciplines too seriously” (2009, 43). I concluded that we should not make grand claims about the status of metaphysics, but should instead only make small, localized claims about the status of particular metaphysical disputes. Which I then went on to do, at some length (i.e., for basically the entirety of the paper). Unsurprisingly, then, when that paper is cited, the idea that is attributed to me is the small, localized claim I made about the particular disputes I looked at in detail.¹ But the background claim deserves attention, too. So I am going to repeat it: *there is no special problem with metaphysics*.

¹ The idea in question is epistemicism, according to which there is little justification for believing either side in the relevant disputes (or, at least, that the kinds of arguments actually being deployed in the literature cannot settle the disputes).

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My primary goal in this paper is to defend that claim at greater length. But in the course of doing so, I will also address an independently interesting question: what *is* metaphysics, anyway? I think that the typical characterizations of metaphysics are inadequate, that a better one is available, and that the better one helps explain why metaphysics is no more problematic than the rest of philosophy.²

In Sect. 1, I will clarify what it means to say, in general, that an area of inquiry faces a special or distinctive³ problem. In Sects. 2, 3, 4 and 5, I will argue that metaphysics does not face one (the promised discussion of the nature of metaphysics takes place in Sect. 4). I will wrap things up in Sect. 6.

1 What's a special problem?

Forget whether it is true or false, what does it even mean to say that there is (or is not) a distinctive problem with metaphysics?⁴ More generally, what is it for any area of inquiry to have a distinctive problem? Presumably, it is for some activity or feature to be both distinctive to the relevant area of inquiry, and in some way objectionable. Not much general can be said about the latter, but the former is worthy of brief investigation. What is it for an activity or feature to be distinctive to a domain—an area of inquiry, a group, or what have you? The first possibilities that suggest themselves are the following:

1. Feature F (activity a , etc.) is distinctive to $d =_{df}$ all ds (members or instances of d , etc.) have F .⁵
2. F is distinctive to $d =_{df}$ only ds have F .
3. F is distinctive to $d =_{df}$ all and only ds have F .

But none of these can be right. (1) is obviously too weak. F can fail to be distinctive to d even though all ds are F , notably if F is widespread among the non- ds . For example, all metaphysicians breathe air, but this is not something distinctive to metaphysics. (2) might seem more promising, but it is also too weak. It might be the case that only ds have F because only a tiny minority of them do. But it would hardly be fair or accurate to say that F is distinctive to d if only very few ds are like that. For example, it would hardly be fair or accurate to say that metaphysics has a distinctive methodology purely on the basis of one mentally unstable metaphysician who chooses what views to defend by asking her cat. But while (1) and (2) make it too easy for something to be

² In this, I disagree with something Merricks says in passing: that little “hangs on the answer” to the “mildly interesting” question of how to characterize metaphysics (2013, 722). I am suggesting that something *does* hang on the answer. What hangs on the answer to “what is metaphysics?” is the answer to other questions like “is metaphysics worth doing?” and “is metaphysics entirely wrong-headed?” For a different reason why it matters what counts as metaphysics, see Barnes 2014.

³ I use ‘special’ and ‘distinctive’ interchangeably.

⁴ Thanks to Rohan Sud for pressing me to better answer this question.

⁵ I am glossing over irrelevant niceties of formulation. Whether this ought to read ‘all instances of x have F or do a ’ or ‘all participants in x have F or do a ’, or something slightly different, will presumably turn on what the value of x is.

distinctive to d , (3) makes it too hard. It should be possible for an area of inquiry to have a distinctive feature even if there are *no* features shared by all and only its instances or participants.

These results suggest that for F to be distinctive to d , less is required than that all ds are F , but more is required than that very few ds are F . What is required is merely that a good proportion of ds have F . One way to implement this would be to strengthen (2)—equivalently, to weaken (3)—to

4. F is distinctive to $d =_{df}$ only ds have F , and a good proportion of ds have F .

Arguably, though, this is still too strong. It might be that F can count as distinctive to d even if some non- ds are F as well, as long as most of the Fs are ds , or more ds than non- ds are F , or something along those lines (if so, this would be a reason for counting (2) as making it both too easy *and* too hard for F to be distinctive of x). To allow for this, I offer the weaker

5. F is distinctive to $d =_{df}$ a notably greater proportion of ds than non- ds have F , and a good proportion of ds have F . In what follows, I will take (5) as my working characterization of what it is for a domain to have a distinctive feature—even though I doubt that it's quite right.

In what follows, I will take (5) as my working characterization of what it is for a domain to have a distinctive feature—even though I doubt that it's quite right.

My concern is not that (5) is vague, even though it clearly is. It is vague because the phrases 'a good proportion' and 'notably greater proportion' are vague. To this, I say: don't look for precision where there is none to be had. I am simply unpacking a folk concept, and it would be silly to expect it to be amenable to a perfectly precise analysis. (' F is distinctive to d just in case 63.9 % or more of ds are F , and only 22.7 % or less of non- xs are F ?) We understand what (5) means, roughly, and nothing I will go on to say turns on how it is precisified.

No, my concern is rather that the notion of distinctiveness probably ought not be characterized purely extensionally, as (5) does. It is likely better to say that a feature or activity can only be distinctive to a domain if it is in some sense intrinsic to the domain, or somehow flows from the nature of that domain, or is causally or constitutively connected to how the domain is individuated, or something like that. That's because it sounds somewhat odd to call a feature F distinctive of some domain d in cases where (5) is met either by accident, or by (not necessarily accidental) external forces.⁶

For example, suppose that a large proportion of redheads are good at math, and a notably higher proportion of redheads are good at math than in the general, non-redhead, population. Further suppose that this is sheer coincidence. There is no causal or constitutive connection between redheadedness and math ability; it is not the case that, say, the same gene predisposes one to redheadedness and math. For an 'external forces' case, instead suppose that redheads are a minority group subject to complex and historically deep-rooted biases, stigmas, and other pressures. Further

⁶ Here's a reason to think this is relevant to the case of metaphysics. It might be the case that some feature or activity counts as distinctive to metaphysics in sense (5), but only during a particular time period, because of various contingent pressures and fashions.

suppose that a large proportion of redheads, notably higher than in the general population, are in jail.⁷ Ought we to say in that being good at math is distinctive of redheads? That being in jail is? In both cases, (5) requires us to say ‘yes’. But it is less than clear that this is what we ought to say.

Despite this problem, I am going to rely on (5) in what follows. First, it will not be easy to formulate a clear alternative according to which F is distinctive to d just in case being F somehow flows from the nature of d . What does that even mean? Defending such an account requires cashing out elusive phrases like ‘the nature of a domain’ and ‘flows from,’ and that is not a task I want to take on. Second, any account of distinctiveness that *does* impose some such requirement will be harder to meet than (5). That is, the problem here is that (5) makes it too easy for a domain to have a distinctive feature. But that is to my opponent’s advantage, not mine; the easier it is for a domain to have a distinctive feature, the easier it is for metaphysics to face a distinctive problem. It is therefore dialectically acceptable for me to rely upon (5) in what follows.

What I have sketched thus far is just an account of what it is for a domain d to have a distinctive feature. But this naturally generates an account of what it is for a domain d to have a distinctive problem: there is a distinctive problem with d just in case some feature or activity (etc.) that is distinctive of d is, in one way or another, problematic. Applying this to the case of metaphysics gives us a straightforward criterion:

There is a special problem with metaphysics just in case there is at least one problematic feature or activity that is reasonably widespread in the discipline, but nonexistent or at least notably less widespread outside the discipline.

I, of course, will deny that there is any such feature.

It ought to be clear that doing so does not commit me to defending every question that has ever been asked by metaphysicians, nor to defending every dispute that metaphysicians have ever engaged in. For all I will say here, it might well be the case that some metaphysical disputes are empty or verbal or otherwise wrong-headed. Metaphysicians can take wrong turns down blind alleys just as much as anyone else. That does not mean that there is a special problem with metaphysics, not unless there is some particular mistake that we make frequently, and notably more so than other areas of philosophy.

2 The basic claim

One way to establish that there is no special problem with metaphysics would be to consider and dismiss each complaint about the field that I have heard or can imagine. That would take a long time. Further, it would be purely defensive in the sense it would not provide anything like a *diagnosis* of why there is no special problem. So I will instead make a more direct, positive argument. My basic claim is

⁷ Thanks to Elizabeth Barnes for pressing this kind of example.

that there is no special problem with metaphysics because metaphysics is too continuous with, and too embedded in, other areas of philosophy.

There are two main aspects of metaphysics that might be—or fail to be—continuous with the rest of philosophy. One of them is its *subject matter*, the kinds of questions it asks. The other is its *methodology*, how it goes about addressing those questions. In the next several sections, I will take these on in reverse order. In Sect. 3, I will argue that the methodology of metaphysics is very much of a piece with the methodology of the rest of philosophy in a way that entails that it is not the source of a distinctive problem for metaphysics. In Sects. 4 and 5, I will argue that the same is true of the subject matter of metaphysics.

This latter claim might seem surprising, to put it mildly. Metaphysicians sit around arguing about whether there are composite objects, whether universals exist, whether causation is fundamental or can be reduced to something else. Nobody else asks those kinds of questions. So in what sense can it be said that the subject matter of metaphysics is of a piece with the subject matter of the rest of philosophy? Addressing this question requires backing up, and addressing a different question: what unifies the questions that constitute the subject matter of metaphysics? That is, what *is* metaphysics, anyway? That's the topic of Sect. 4. In Sect. 5 I explain why the proper conception of metaphysics entails that its subject matter is too continuous with or embedded in the rest of philosophy to be the source of a distinctive problem.

3 Continuity of methodology

Metaphysics does not have a distinctive methodology in the sense I characterized above. The general idea here is simple. In light of the discussion in Sect. 1, any method that is distinctive to metaphysics must be used reasonably widely within metaphysics. But the boundaries between the subfields of philosophy are both vague and somewhat arbitrary. So there is every reason to think that any method used widely in metaphysics is used at least relatively widely outside metaphysics as well—likely throughout philosophy, but at a minimum in neighboring fields like logic, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language.

Even cursory reflection upon the methodological techniques that metaphysicians in fact use bears out this idea. How do metaphysicians go about their business? They use a priori reasoning. They also use empirical claims, though arguably not as frequently as they should (see Ladyman and Ross 2007). They use thought experiments. They engage in counterfactual and modal reasoning. They track what entails what, and also use inference to the best explanation. They tease out consequences of views, and hidden contradictions. They reckon costs and benefits. They counterexample each other. They postulate entities to do various theoretical jobs, or account for some phenomenon. And so forth.

None of those methods or techniques is distinctive to metaphysics. They indisputably are not distinctive to metaphysics in the sense of 'distinctness' captured by (4), which requires that they be used *only* by metaphysicians. They also are not distinctive to metaphysics in the weaker sense of 'distinctive' captured by (5), which only requires that they be used notably more frequently within metaphysics

than outside it. And if metaphysics does not have any distinctive methodological techniques, it obviously cannot be the case that one of its distinctive methodological techniques is problematic.

That much is clear. But it is not quite enough to show that metaphysics does not have a distinctive methodological problem, because metaphysics can have a distinctive methodological problem without having a distinctive methodology. This would be the case if it were true that metaphysics distinctively *misuses* some non-distinctive methodology. On this line of thought, there is some technique *T* that is not distinctive to metaphysics—that is pervasive throughout philosophy—but that metaphysicians distinctively misuse. This is a more promising way to argue that metaphysics has a special methodological problem, because there is a clear frontrunner candidate for *T*: a priori reasoning.

Clearly, almost all (ahem, all) philosophers use a priori reasoning. But metaphysicians frequently use it in a way that many would find deeply problematic. Metaphysicians frequently use it to justify claims about what exists, about what objective reality is like. Not all metaphysicians, of course. Some stick to what Strawson called ‘descriptive metaphysics’ (1959). Some stick to the ‘Canberra plan,’ endorsing Frank Jackson’s ‘modest role’ for metaphysics (1998). But it would be farcical to try to deny that broader uses of a priori reasoning are widespread in contemporary metaphysics. We make largely a priori arguments for and against the truth of the principle of unrestricted composition, and hence what composite objects exist. We make largely a priori arguments for and against the existence of nonactual possible worlds, other times, and abstract entities. And so on. But, goes the complaint, this is misusing a methodology if anything is! A priori reasoning can reveal to us analytic truths, if there are any, and can reveal to us the contours of our concepts. Maybe it can reveal to us the content of our own thoughts. But how is it supposed to tell us anything about *what there is*? A priori reasoning has its uses, but justifying the kinds of claims about the nature and structure of objective reality that are endemic to contemporary metaphysics is not among them.

Now, that claim is controversial, and has been since at least Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. People disagree about the nature and proper scope of a priori reasoning, as well as about how to draw the distinction between the a priori and a posteriori justification. Such questions continue to be of central importance, and I hope to say more about them someday. For present purposes, I will just assume for the sake of argument that the attitude of the previous paragraph is correct: a priori reasoning cannot justify any claims about what exists, or what objective reality is like. It does not follow that metaphysics involves the distinctive misuse of a methodology.

The reason should be obvious. That a methodology is widely misused within metaphysics does not entail that that misuse is distinctive to metaphysics in the sense of (5). For the misuse of a priori reasoning to be distinctive to metaphysics, it also has to be the case that it is nowhere near as widely misused outside of metaphysics. *And that simply is not the case*. Philosophers in all kinds of other subfields also use a priori reasoning in the putatively problematic way. Ethicists rely upon intuitions and thought experiments to draw conclusions about what’s right and wrong, what moral theories are true or false, what the moral facts are. Or, indeed,

whether there are moral properties at all (e.g. Mackie's 1977 'argument from queerness'). Philosophers of mind argue for and against the truth of physicalism on largely a priori grounds; ditto for the defense of various particular views about the nature of phenomenal properties, mental representation, and so forth. Philosophers of language make claims about, say, how conditionals or deontic modals work that involve postulating all kinds of machinery—propositions, functions, worlds (sometimes they will append a deflationary story about how we can avoid taking such things seriously, but often not).

Cases abound. It should be clear that I am not citing isolated, cherry-picked examples here, which should obviate any concerns about the (already acknowledged) vagueness about just what would constitute a "notably greater" or "more widespread" use of the relevant methodology. The use of a priori reasoning to discern the objective nature of reality might be distinctive to *philosophy*, but it is not distinctive to metaphysics. So even assuming that it is indeed a problem, it is not a special problem with metaphysics.

At this point, someone will object that I am being too conservative or parochial in what I am counting as metaphysics. Sure, goes the objection, if you only count as metaphysics the research activities of people who go to particular conferences, teach particular courses, and list 'metaphysics' as an AOS on their cvs, then yes, it will follow that the use of a priori reasoning to discover the objective nature of reality is widespread outside metaphysics. But, the objection continues, it is better to count more things as metaphysics, and say that lots of philosophers do it. When an ethicist gives an argument for the existence of moral properties, she is actually doing metaphysics. To sharpen this point, distinguish 'metaphysics in the narrow sense' from 'metaphysics in the broad sense'.⁸ Metaphysics in the narrow sense is individuated by the self-identification of its practitioners, through AOS's and conference attendance and the like; metaphysics in the broad sense is individuated in some other way. The objection on the table, then, is that I have at best shown that there is no distinctive methodological problem with metaphysics in the narrow sense.

I agree that the question of just what exactly counts as metaphysics is absolutely crucial to the question of whether there is any special problem with it. And I agree that we can stipulatively define 'metaphysics in the broad sense' so that it encompasses all and only the (putatively) problematic uses of a priori reasoning. After all, we can stipulatively define it to precisely *be* any attempt to a priori justify claims about the objective nature of reality. So defined, and given the assumption that there is a problem with that methodology, it will unsurprisingly follow that there indeed is a distinctive problem with metaphysics in this broad sense.

But this would be a misleading and unfair charge. It turns a complaint about a subdiscipline of philosophy into a complaint about a practice that pervades much of the field—while continuing to use language that suggests that the problem is with a subdiscipline. It just annexes the existing term 'metaphysics' as a label for a

⁸ This point came out of discussion at Michigan, but I can't remember if there is a specific individual to whom I should attribute it.

putatively problematic methodology. This is problematic for at least two reasons. For one thing, we can perfectly well talk directly about the methodological issue in its own right: can we, or can we not, justify claims about the nature of the world a priori? The only reason to call all uses of the putatively problematic methodology ‘metaphysics’ is to turn that term into a pejorative.⁹ Second, it is not even true that all metaphysics in the narrow sense is metaphysics in the broad sense; the latter does not subsume the former. Plenty of people who count as metaphysicians in the narrow sense restrict themselves to conceptual analysis or the Canberra plan, or try to primarily rely on empirical results (certainly, it is perfectly possible for a metaphysician in the narrow sense to do so).

The upshot is that the objection fails. We have not been offered a characterization of a distinctively problematic activity that is properly called ‘metaphysics’. Perhaps there is another way to characterize ‘metaphysics in the broad sense’, but I do not see it, and suspect efforts will be victim to similar objections. Indeed, I do not think the notion of ‘metaphysics in the narrow sense’ with which I have thus far been working is very useful either. Conference attendance and claims on one’s cv do not make one a metaphysician (certainly, most of us have at some point reacted to a job candidate’s claimed AOS with thoughts like, “she’s not *really* a metaphysician; she’s a philosopher of language”). So forget the elusive contrast between the ‘broad sense’ and the ‘narrow sense’. What is metaphysics, full stop?

It has become clear that that making any further progress requires clarifying this. It is time to bracket the question of whether there is a special problem with metaphysics in order to figure out what metaphysics is in the first place.

4 The nature of metaphysics

What is metaphysics? The question is sufficiently difficult that van Inwagen opens his Stanford Encyclopedia entry on metaphysics by admitting that “it is not easy to say” (2007). But, of course, people try. They say that metaphysics is the study of “being *qua* being” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* book IV). They say that it is the attempt to “get behind all appearances and describe things as they really are” (van Inwagen 1998, 11), and that it is the study of “what the world is like... as opposed to... how we think and talk about the world” (Sider 2008, 1 and note 1). They say that metaphysics is “inquiry into the most basic and general features of reality and our place in it” (Kim and Sosa 1999, ix). They say that it is the study of “the

⁹ Compare someone who is biased against some racial or cultural group R, who claims to dislike Rs because they engage in certain behaviors and ways of talking that make her uncomfortable. Upon learning that these behaviors and ways of talking are proportionately no more widespread in the relevant group than outside it, she stubbornly decides to apply the label ‘R’ to all and only the people who do in fact engage in them (this is not a realistic portrait of an actual racist, of course, though it does partially reflect what is behind offensive claims like, “oh, he’s practically a white guy...”). Whatever claims this person goes on to make using the label “R” are not about Rs in the sense other people have in mind. It would be better to just talk directly about the putatively problematic behaviors.

fundamental structure of reality” (Sider 2011, 1).¹⁰ And they say that is “about what grounds what. It is about the structure of the world. It is about what is fundamental, and what derives from it” (Schaffer 2009, 379).

There is something to each of these ideas, certainly. But none of them is quite right on its own. To see why not, and to see what kind of characterization of metaphysics is needed instead, we need to think about what we want from such a characterization. I will offer three constraints on a proper characterization of metaphysics. Perhaps there are others, but these three will suffice to point us in the right direction (what follows draws upon chapter 7 of my ms).

Here is the first constraint: an adequate characterization of metaphysics must go some distance towards distinguishing it from science (see also van Inwagen 2007, Sect. 4). I say “go some distance towards” because the line is unlikely to be crystal clear. But *some* difference must be noted, just as a consequence of the very idea of providing a characterization of anything at all. A characterization of the Olympic sport of luge that failed to distinguish it from the sport of skeleton would not be a very good characterization. The task of characterizing metaphysics is no different; it’s just that science rather than skeleton is the activity with which it might be confused.

This first constraint removes a number of candidate characterizations of metaphysics from contention. It entails that metaphysics is not just the attempt to “get behind the appearances” and study “what the world is like,” as opposed to what we think it is like. Scientists try to do that too—as do census takers, insurance appraisers, and the police (see also Conee 2005, 201). It also entails that metaphysics is not the study of fundamental reality. Although not all of science studies that—much of it, such as biology, geology, and meteorology, studies *nonfundamental* reality—physics certainly does. And, finally, the first constraint entails that metaphysics is not just the study of what grounds what, of the structure of reality. Again, not all science involves the study of this, but some, notably chemistry, does (and certainly, much of the rest of philosophy involves claims about what grounds what; see my ms chapter 1).

The second constraint matters less for current purposes, but is worth flagging for independent reasons: an adequate characterization of metaphysics ought to allow metaphysics to have a subject matter even if it turns out that there is no fundamental level, no bottom (somewhat more precisely, even if it turns out that some or all dependence chains fail to terminate in something fundamental). I myself take this to be a live epistemic possibility. While the intuition that there is a fundamental level is reasonably strong (e.g. Schaffer 2010, 37), that does not itself constitute evidence for the existence of one, and I have not seen any convincing arguments (see Schaffer 2003, 2010;¹¹ Cameron 2008; and my ms §4.5). I therefore prefer to leave the matter

¹⁰ Since I attribute this characterization to Sider, I should note that he would agree with at least some of the criticisms I will lodge against it. As he says, “I got a little carried away with my rhetoric” (2013, 754).

¹¹ In 2003, Schaffer claims that “there is no evidence in... favor” of the claim that “that there exists a fundamental level” (498). In 2010, he instead says that “there must be a ground of being. If one thing exists only *in virtue of* another, then there must be something from which the reality of the derivative entities ultimately derives” (2010, 37). This apparent contradiction reflects a change of position. But it also reflects the fact that in 2003 he is primarily concerned with composition, with the idea that the world might be *gunky*—and in 2010 it becomes clear that he does not think that composition has anything to do with fundamentality at all. Later Schaffer thinks that the world has a fundamental level even if it is gunky.

open, and that requires asking what would or ought to happen if it turns out that it really is just turtles all the way down.

This second constraint rules out—for the second time—the idea that metaphysics is the study of fundamental reality. That characterization holds metaphysics hostage to the existence of a fundamental level, for if it turns out there is no bottom, metaphysics would have no subject matter. But it clearly still would. Indeed, a large amount of what currently passes for metaphysics could go on just as before. Some particular views would be reassessed, and some particular claims would be reformulated, but the overall metaphysical enterprise would not somehow be cast in (further) doubt.

This leads us to the third constraint, which perhaps underwrites the second: an adequate characterization of metaphysics must to some extent respect the actual practices of actual metaphysicians. I mean here actual metaphysicians in roughly the narrow sense above—academic philosophers who call themselves metaphysicians, who are considered by others to be metaphysicians, and so forth. Note that this constraint is hedged, as the first one was. I am certainly not making the absurd claim that an adequate characterization ought to ensure that everything that actual metaphysicians talk about automatically falls within the proper subject matter of metaphysics. (metaphysicians talk about lots of things, after all—how to potty train our kids, where the bar is, the Clemson football schedule.) I am not even claiming that everything that actual metaphysicians talk about when they would describe themselves as talking about metaphysics automatically falls within the proper subject matter of metaphysics. That's because characterizing metaphysics is not a purely descriptive task, but also partly a normative one. The question is not just “what does the discipline in fact concern itself with?”, but rather “what *ought* the discipline concern itself with?” This question might get a revisionary answer; it might be the case that some topics that have been traditionally considered metaphysical are not ones that metaphysicians ought to worry about at all. Nonetheless, even a revisionary answer is constrained to a significant extent by the actual practices of actual metaphysicians. If we ignore all of the sociology and history, if we ignore what is and has been called ‘metaphysics’, we risk changing the subject entirely. For example, I cannot claim that staircases ought to be the sole topic of metaphysics; that is a clear nonstarter.

Like the first two, this third constraint rules out several candidate characterizations of metaphysics. It rules out—for the third time!—the claim that metaphysics is about fundamental reality, or the fundamental nature or structure of reality. That's because not very much of traditional metaphysical discussion is about phenomena agreed by all parties to be fundamental. Rather, most of it is about (a) whether or not various phenomena are fundamental, and (b) what accounts for them if they are not.¹² Consider disputes about the nature of laws, or causation, or consciousness, or modality, or properties, or numbers, or *practically any other traditional metaphysical topic*. What is at issue in all of these cases is whether the phenomenon can be

¹² Compare Barnes, and what Jackson calls solving “the location problem” for various phenomena (1998, 4–5).

accounted for in other terms, and if so, what other terms. (for example: is nomic force basic, as claimed by anti-Humean realists like David Armstrong, Michael Tooley, and John Carroll? Or can Humeans like David Lewis pull off their project?) The person who claims that metaphysics is the study of fundamental reality cannot account for the actual structure of these discussions, and indeed is committed to the claim that whether or not such topics count as metaphysics depends upon which side turns out to be right. But that is just wrong; the dispute about the nature of laws, for example, is a properly metaphysical one, whichever side wins. In short: the claim that metaphysics is the study of the fundamental nature of reality violates this third constraint as well as the first and second. It is of course not as implausible as the claim that metaphysics is the study of staircases, but it still moves too far away from the subject matter of metaphysics traditionally conceived. We metaphysicians spend much of our time trying to figure out what is fundamental, and what depends on what.¹³

For similar reasons, the third constraint also entails that metaphysics is not just “inquiry into the most basic and general features of reality and our place in it” (Kim and Sosa 1999, ix). That suggests that the only nonfundamentalia studied by metaphysics are things having to do with humans—consciousness, free will and the like. This is not the case.

Finally, the third constraint also entails that metaphysics is not the study of being *qua* being, at least on one understanding of what that phrase means. I take it that Aristotle’s idea is that metaphysics looks not at a special class of things, but rather investigates all things in a certain way—namely, as, well, *things that exist*. The metaphysician is interested in the nature of existence, and in the features shared by all existing things. Accordingly, Michael Loux attributes to Aristotle the claim that metaphysics “seeks to understand not merely the concept of being, but also very general concepts like unity or identity, difference, similarity, and dissimilarity that apply to everything that is” (2006, 3). But while this characterization of metaphysics¹⁴ meets the first and second constraints, it fails the third. Metaphysicians clearly do more than investigate the features shared by everything that exists—namely, existence and self-identity (if those are different)—and we also go beyond the “very general” concepts that Loux lists. For one thing, we also investigate the nature of particular phenomena like consciousness, freedom, time, causation—phenomena that deserve and receive special attention precisely because they seem to be so *unlike* other things. For another, we also investigate the various categories into which the world seems to be organized: properties, states of affairs, events, and so forth. Now, obviously Aristotle would agree with that basic idea (see

¹³ That last remark might make it sound as though a plausible characterization of metaphysics can be reached by conjoining the idea that metaphysics is about the fundamental nature of reality with Schaffer’s idea that metaphysics is about what grounds what. Certainly, at least if ‘ground’ is understood broadly (as ‘build’ in my sense; see my 2011 and especially ms chapter 2), this conjunctive claim makes much better sense of actual metaphysical practice. But it is still inadequate; it still fails the first constraint.

¹⁴ I mean, this one particular interpretation of the particular Aristotelian slogan. I make no claim about whether it accurately reflects Aristotle’s full views on the nature of metaphysics.

the *Categories*), but it is not captured by the interpretation of the slogan “metaphysics is the study of being qua being” that is currently on the table.

Thus far, I have articulated three constraints on an adequate characterization of metaphysics, and used them to reject the following five accounts:

Metaphysics is the attempt to “get behind all appearances and describe things as they really are”.

Metaphysics is the study of the fundamental nature or structure of reality.

Metaphysics is the study of “what grounds what. It is about the structure of the world. It is about what is fundamental, and what derives from it”.

Metaphysics is the study of “the most basic and general features of reality and our place in it”.

Metaphysics is the study of “being *qua* being”.

What to say now? After a somewhat similar investigation, Earl Conee just throws up his hands: “we have thought about the subject matter of metaphysics. We have discovered nothing conclusive. Ah, well, that’s philosophy for you” (2005, 205). I sympathize, but will try to do at least a little better. My characterization of metaphysics will not be perfectly precise, and will not lend itself to quite such nice slogans as the ones above, but it will be more accurate—and it will help explain why there is no special problem with metaphysics. So here goes.

Metaphysics is—largely but not exhaustively—the *maintainer of the toolbox*. It investigates the categories, tools, and notions upon which other philosophers (and non-philosophers) uncritically rely. Metaphysicians are like building inspectors; we look within the walls to assess the integrity of the beams and wiring. We are like a Department of Public Works, ensuring that the traffic lights and storm drains are in good working order. Metaphysicians shine lights where others don’t want to look.

Let me try to cash out that jumble of metaphors. Philosophers of all stripes make claims using expressions like ‘must be’, ‘depends upon’, ‘property’, ‘fact’, ‘object’, ‘part’, ‘event’, ‘cause’, and many others. One main goal of metaphysics is to figure out what worldly matters, if any, answer to this kind of pervasive “toolbox” philosophical vocabulary. Metaphysics in this sense is the study of what there is, and what what there is is like, for a restricted value of ‘what’.

Some examples might help. While it is the metaethicist who claims that there are (or are not) moral facts or properties, it is the metaphysician who wonders what facts and properties might be, or whether we can somehow do without them. Or consider the recent flurry of attention to grounding or ontological dependence more generally (what I like to call ‘building’). Just about every philosopher makes claims about certain phenomena depending on other phenomena—just about every philosopher will say, for some value of x and y , that x depends on y , or exists in virtue of y , etc. (see my ms chapter 1 for some examples.) It is the job of metaphysics to train the spotlight on this talk, to try to unpack it, to see whether anything really answers to it, to see what difficulties different accounts might face, and so forth. Dependence is in the philosopher’s toolbox; metaphysicians examine it to see whether it is in good working order. Metaphysicians talk about dependence because everyone else engages in dependence talk.

I want to emphasize that my claim is that metaphysics tries to figure out what worldly matters, *if any*, answer to the toolbox philosophical vocabulary. For all I'm saying here, it may well be that no worldly matters answer to some of the talk. Perhaps the best account of causal talk is one according to which there isn't really any causation out in the world; we simply project it onto certain sequences of events, and mistakenly believe it to be a mind-independent phenomenon. Perhaps the best account of modal talk is an expressivist one (along the lines of Thomasson 2013). Such views are claims about what worldly matters, if any, answer to modal and causal vocabulary—to exactly the same extent as the most reified, realist treatments you can imagine.

Now, I said that maintaining the toolbox is a big part of what metaphysics is. I did not say it was the only thing. Not all metaphysical inquiry can be understood as investigating and unpacking toolbox vocabulary. For example, traditional questions about free will, consciousness, and time are not readily thought of in this way. Is there a way to characterize metaphysics that unifies these questions with questions about, say, how to understand dependence talk? If there is, I do not see it. (at least, I do not see any way other than the attempts that I have already rejected.) I am thus inclined to think that metaphysics is a disjunctive enterprise. It subsumes two rather different projects that are perhaps united only by socio-historical accident.¹⁵ The first is the toolbox role; the second involves investigating the nature of certain particularly puzzling phenomena that seem somehow recalcitrant to purely empirical investigation: consciousness, freedom, time.¹⁶ I have little to say about why exactly *these* questions rather than others, or about why some of these remain partly in the purview of philosophy rather than in the purview of science. I will leave this underdeveloped, and just flag that this is part of what the metaphysician studies.

This disjunctive characterization of metaphysics is not perfectly precise, and cannot be made so without two things, neither of which seem likely to be forthcoming. One is a better characterization of the hodgepodge of questions that constitute the second metaphysical project; the other is a better characterization of what exactly belongs in the toolbox of expressions the examination of which constitutes the first metaphysical project. Still, my characterization meets all three constraints. It respects the actual practice of actual metaphysicians, and does not hold metaphysics hostage to the existence of a bottom level of absolutely fundamental entities. And it does distinguish metaphysics from science, or at any rate distinguishes the first metaphysical project from science. Science does not try to figure out what worldly matters, if any, answer to or make true the expressions and concepts that are seemingly crucial to the rest of philosophy—expressions and concepts like 'could have been', 'property', and 'in virtue of'.

¹⁵ I am not alone in doubting that metaphysics has some single, nondisjunctive theme; both Merricks (2013) and van Inwagen (2007) share my skepticism. Still, I do think a bit more can be said than that it is just a total hodgepodge. I am categorizing metaphysical questions into two categories, the first of which is reasonably unified even if the second may not be.

¹⁶ Perhaps gender as well; see Barnes 2014.

Further, my characterization will help show that and explain why there is no special problem with metaphysics. I have suggested that any distinctive problem would presumably be either with the methodology or the subject matter of metaphysics, and have already argued that there is no distinctive problem with the methodology of metaphysics. So what I still need to argue is that there is no distinctive problem with the subject matter of metaphysics, either. To that I now turn, armed with my view about what the subject matter of metaphysics *is*.

5 Continuity of subject matter

The subject matter of metaphysics, like its methodology, is too continuous with the subject matter of the rest of philosophy for it to be the source of a distinctive problem. In saying this, my claim is not that metaphysicians ask the same questions as other philosophers. Rather, my claim is that metaphysicians ask about the presuppositions of the questions that other philosophers ask, and ask about the underlying structure of the views proposed in response to those questions. The subject matter of metaphysics is literally *embedded in* the rest of philosophy. That is why there cannot be any distinctive problem with it.

Insofar as metaphysics maintains the philosophical toolbox, any problem with the subject matter of metaphysics is also a problem with the subject matter of the rest of philosophy. It cannot be the case that it is fine to talk about whether there are moral properties, or what the property of biological fitness is, but somehow deeply problematic to talk about whether there are properties, and what they are like if there are any. It cannot be the case that it is fine to talk about whether the physical facts determine the mental facts, but somehow deeply problematic to talk about what facts are, or what determination is. And it cannot be the case that it is fine to say that token expressions mean what they do partially in virtue of the meanings of their constituents, or partially in virtue of speaker intentions, but somehow deeply problematic to talk about what ‘in virtue of’ means. I could continue this list of examples indefinitely.

Let me again emphasize that one may not like certain *views* about what properties are, or about what ‘in virtue of’ means (etc.). One might prefer an austere nominalism to realism about universals; one might prefer some kind of deflationist account of ‘in virtue of’ talk to postulating a primitive relation of grounding. But that is not to do *away* with metaphysics. That is to *do* metaphysics. It is to draw conclusions about what worldly matters do or do not answer to the toolbox notions relied upon by other philosophers.

My claim, in short, is that the subject matter of metaphysics cannot be distinguished from the subject matter of the rest of philosophy in a way that allows it to be distinctively problematic. I will explore this idea a bit further by considering two objections to it.

The first objection comes from a Carnapian (1956) angle.¹⁷ Someone might say that the claim that metaphysicians inspect the tools that other philosophers use

¹⁷ The relation to actual Carnap is not entirely clear.

amounts to the claim that metaphysicians ask external questions about the frameworks within which other philosophers pursue internal questions. And, the Carnapian objector continues, that is a bad idea; external questions are meaningless. So my characterization of metaphysics backfires. It does not protect metaphysics from attack, but instead uncovers a distinctive problem with it.

I think this is exactly the wrong moral to draw. This Carnapian objector is saying that other areas of philosophy can help themselves to the toolbox notions—properties, facts, causation, necessity, dependence—even though it is wrong-headed to ask any questions about them. This would leave philosophy filled with empty jargon, with concepts and expressions on which we are not allowed to shine the light. This seems to me in tension with the demand for rigor and clarity that characterizes (internal?) philosophical discussion.¹⁸ It also seems to me to be in tension with the seriousness with which philosophers treat their non-metaphysical claims. If the items in the philosophical toolkit are just parts of an entirely optional linguistic framework that we adopt for practical reasons, and if, à la Carnap, there is no sense to be made of the idea that any frameworks are better than any others, then it is hard to see philosophy itself as more than a game. Defending the claim that it *is* more than a game is beyond the scope of this paper. But most of us, in most moods, think that it is. Again, I am merely claiming that metaphysics stands or falls with the rest of philosophy. There may be reasons to be skeptical of philosophy overall. But there is little room to think that the rest of philosophy is in good shape, but metaphysics is distinctively problematic.

The second objection to my claim in this section is that even if it is successful as far as it goes, it does not go far enough. I characterized metaphysics disjunctively, and I have only argued that the subject matter that falls within the first category is too embedded in the rest of philosophy to have a distinctive problem. So nothing I have yet said shows that the subject matter that falls within the second category—traditional metaphysical questions about free will, consciousness, and the like—cannot have a distinctive problem.

Fair enough. One thing to say is that the subject matter of the second category is less frequently the target of anti-metaphysics sentiment than that of the first category. When people complain about metaphysics, they are not typically complaining about the literature on free will or consciousness. The more important thing to say, though, is that the very disjunctive nature of both metaphysics itself and of the second category prevents this from being a real problem. Although the first category—maintaining the toolbox—is more or less unified, the second one is more of a hodgepodge. There does not seem to be much of a pervasive theme, other than the vague and too broad ideas that I have already dismissed: getting behind the appearances, figuring out what the world is really like (see also van Inwagen 2007; Merricks 2013). So it is reasonably unlikely that a problem with any particular topic would count as a problem that is distinctive to metaphysics in the

¹⁸ It is one thing to conclude that the question “are there properties?” ought to receive a negative answer, and to think that expressions like “feature” and “similar in certain respects” are just ways of talking that do not carry any worldly commitments to universals or perhaps not even to sets. It is another to think that the question “are there properties?” is illegitimate, meaningless, and ought not be asked at all.

sense of (5).¹⁹ I have been clear from the outset that the claim that some particular metaphysical question or debate is misguided falls far short of the claim that there is a distinctive problem with metaphysics.

So: the subject matter of metaphysics in the sense of the second category is not sufficiently united for it to have a problem that is sufficiently widespread within metaphysics to count as distinctive. The subject matter of metaphysics in the sense of the first category is too entangled with the rest of philosophy for it to have a problem that is not a problem with the rest of philosophy. It is this second claim that is intended to bear most of the weight here.

6 Conclusion

I have not argued that there are no problems with metaphysics. I have simply argued that there are no *distinctive, special* problems with metaphysics. There might be localized problems with particular metaphysical disputes, and there might be big, widespread problems that pervade much of philosophy. But there is no problem both specific to and widespread within metaphysics.

I readily admit that my overall point in this paper is to a large extent a verbal one. Indeed, to a large extent I am complaining about how people title their conferences, anthologies, and APA sessions. But sometimes verbal issues matter. It matters that all the conferences and APA sessions are called things like “metametaphysics” or “the methodology of metaphysics” rather than “metaphilosophy” or “the methodology of philosophy”. (Timothy Williamson’s 2007 *The Philosophy of Philosophy* is a welcome exception to this pattern.) Why does it matter? It matters because it arguably affects things like funding and respect. More importantly, it matters because it enables philosophers who are not metaphysicians to bury their heads in the sand, and to avoid the hard questions that affect their subdisciplines too. Finally, it matters because it licenses a certain kind of sloppiness. The prevalence and well-entrenchedness of the idea that metaphysics requires special defense subtly encourages people to generalize too rapidly from local problems to all of metaphysics, and at the same time encourages them to generalize too slowly from most of metaphysics to most of philosophy.

We ought not confuse an objection to a particular question, view, argument strategy, or debate with an objection to metaphysics as a whole. We ought not forget that certain questions—like the question of whether, and how, we can learn about the world a priori—are questions for everyone, not just metaphysicians. We ought to remember that metaphysics is too continuous with the rest of philosophy for it to be distinctively problematic.

¹⁹ Suppose I introduce ‘blerg’ as an expression that picks out anything that is either a pickle, a prime number, or embarrassing. It is not very *prima facie* plausible that there is anything distinctively objectionable about blergs.

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