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VI. WHAT IS METAPHYSICS?

GEORGE N. SCHLESINGER

I

METAPHYSICS has been around for longer than most disciplines studied nowadays. It is surprising therefore that it is so very difficult to find in the relevant literature an adequate answer to the elementary question "what is metaphysics"? More remarkably: not only has there been no satisfactory, comprehensive description, but much that eminent thinkers have said in order to give a partial characterization of metaphysics seems quite obviously wrong. I shall consider recent statements made by philosophers ranging from those who have regarded metaphysics as representing the profoundest kind of inquiry to so-called anti-metaphysicians. In the next section I shall confine myself to raising obvious objections to these statements. In most cases when serious and competent thinkers do, after considerable amount of studying a subject, make pronouncements on it which appear untenable it is a mistake to dismiss these as just so much groundless nonsense. These statements, more often than not, have been prompted by genuine features of a topic which however may not have been correctly identified. In the last section I shall attempt to identify the legitimate bases of some of these misguided pronouncements.

Let me end this introduction with a brief statement of what is metaphysics which most philosophers will not dispute:

Metaphysical problems, are problems about how the world is, but which scientists do not tackle, leaving them to philosophers to investigate.

This definition of course gives little insight into the nature of metaphysics as it does not tell us what intrinsic features of metaphysical statements set them apart from scientific statements which would explain why scientists regard metaphysical problems outside their scope of inquiry. It is useful however for classificatory purposes.

II

(1) One of the most often heard opinions is that metaphysics, just like science is concerned with the nature of reality however the former deals with questions of much greater generality. For instance, Keith Campbell says:

Metaphysics is concerned with the overall framework of reality¹

and then

Metaphysical inquiry is distinguished from science . . . only by attempting a more comprehensive and more systematic theory.²

Among the many other philosophers who have expressed very similar views we find Bruce Wilshire,³ John Hospers,⁴ and Anthony Quinton.⁵

It may be true that some metaphysical problems are very general, but greater generality is by no means a universally distinguishing characteristic. The problem of other minds, for instance, which all will agree is outside the purview of the scientist who leaves it to the philosopher to grapple with, is certainly much narrower in scope than the physicist's problem what are the ultimate, undividable constituents of matter. The latter after all concerns the nature of all matter while the former is related only to the properties of a tiny sub-class of these, namely humans or at most some animals. Those who ask whether others have mental properties seem less concerned "with the overall framework of reality" than are the experts in quantum mechanics.

(2) Another view, perhaps even more widely voiced is that metaphysics represents an attempt to penetrate beyond the surface of experience and obtain knowledge about what lies beneath. Campbell for instance says:

. . . the very task of metaphysics sets itself, is to pierce the veil of appearance to pass beyond how things seem, to

¹ *Metaphysics: An Introduction* (Encino, 1976), p. 1.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

³ *Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York, 1969), p. 18.

⁴ *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, 1967), p. 349.

⁵ *The Nature of Things* (London, 1973), p. 235.

reach to the basic, inner, and perhaps hidden part of the world.⁶

Carnap⁷ and Ayer⁸ also characterize metaphysics as an attempt to gain access to what transcends observation which they find objectionable. Evandro Agazzi⁹ in a recent review of the opposition of logical positivists to metaphysics as an ill-conceived enterprise since they are not content to know as they should be just what is experienceable. Similar characterizations are found in the writings of Brand Blanshard¹⁰ and W. H. Walsh.¹¹

It seems that these authors were even less successful in depicting the most salient feature of metaphysics which sets it apart from science. It is hard to see how the hypothesis postulating that seemingly solid, continuous and stationary bodies do in fact consist of tiny particles rushing about at enormous speeds, can be said to pass less beyond how things seems than the metaphysicians attribution of mind to other bodies. On the contrary micro-particles of the physicist are the kind of entities that will forever be remote from my direct grasp whereas minds are not so unfamiliar to me being intimately acquainted at least with one member of the species, my own mind.

But there are even more poignant examples. The status of temporal becoming is a typical metaphysical problem. Some metaphysicians have insisted that time flows. They have contended that a given instant of time, namely the NOW, is momentarily "alive," is more real than other temporal points. Events that are in the distant future keep moving toward the NOW until they momentarily coincide with it and subsequently recede further and further into the past. Unquestionably, this claim does not at all represent an attempt "to pass beyond how things seem" but on the contrary it is very much an attempt to affirm that things are basically the way they seem to be.

Then again it seems that the realist metaphysician's claim that chairs and tables—and not merely sense impressions thereof—actually exist out there seems less removed from immediate experience than the

physicist's claim that these chairs and tables are assemblies of all sorts of imperceptible particles.

(3) It is not uncommon to hear various versions of the claim that metaphysical statements are not straightforward statements about facts. Wilshire for instance tells us:

... metaphysics thought about thought-about-the-world
it is talk about talk-about-the-world.

Campbell expresses similar thoughts. Walsh¹² thinks that metaphysical assertions are not strictly true or false at all. G. J. Warnock¹³ also seems to think that such assertions are more correctly spoken of as illuminating or exciting rather than true or false.¹⁴ Strawson¹⁵ explicitly states that metaphysics is concerned not with the nature of external facts but rather with the structure of our thoughts about these facts.

There is no need for lengthy arguments to convince the reader that on the surface it is very hard to see why, for instance, the assertion that others are not robots but possess a mind expresses a less solid fact about the nature of external reality than the assigning a certain value to the mass of the electron.

I shall not continue to pile up more problematic statements but proceed with the constructive part of my paper.

III

Let me begin with a relatively short description of what I believe is the crucial difference between the two disciplines under discussion, a description I shall soon elaborate on. What I suggest is this: both scientific and metaphysical hypotheses purport to account for experience but in the case of the former the empirical situation is dynamic and gradually forces upon us the hypothesis which we eventually accept. The empirical conditions relevant to a metaphysical hypothesis, on the other hand, while they may not be entirely static the changes they

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁷ *Logical Positivism* ed. by A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, 1959), p. 80.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 760–1.

⁹ *Ratio* vol. 19 (1977), p. 162.

¹⁰ "In Defense of Metaphysics" in *Metaphysics* ed. by W. E. Kennick and M. Lazerowitz (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), pp. 331–35.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York, 1967), vol. V, p. 302.

¹² Nobody denies that quantum mechanics is a branch of physics. Some instrumentalists have, however, advanced the (metaphysical) claim that all its equations are mere calculating devices and not statements about real entities. Be it as it may, the debate concerning the moving 'NOW' is sufficient to show that metaphysicians do not always try to go behind what is given but simply try to describe it.

¹³ *Metaphysics* (London, 1965), p. 183.

¹⁴ *English Philosophy since 1900* (Oxford, 1958), 136–7.

¹⁵ *Individuals* (Garden City, 1959), p. xiii.

undergo are not decisive; there is no relentless accumulation of evidence in favor of any one of rival hypotheses. The situation in the case of scientific hypotheses is dynamic in the following way: to begin with there may be as much evidence in favor of h_1 as there is for h_2 . However if in fact h_1 is nearer to the truth than h_2 then as we gain more knowledge about nature, more and more observations are bound to come to our notice which fits smoothly with h_1 only, and in order to prevent them from clashing with h_2 extra hypotheses will have to be postulated. As time goes on these extra, ad hoc hypotheses, will keep growing in number indefinitely and make it increasingly more difficult to maintain hypothesis h_2 . Eventually a state will be reached when it will be so much more cumbersome to maintain h_2 than h_1 so that everyone will abandon h_2 in favor of h_1 .

In the case of a metaphysical problem, however, the empirical situation is more or less frozen. Consider the famous controversy between McTaggart and Russell concerning the question whether there is a moving NOW and the many well-known arguments that have been advanced in favor of their respective positions. Each one of these arguments could have equally well been put forward in the context of scientific knowledge that existed 50 years ago or 500 years ago. The empirical features of the universe that are relevant to the hypotheses of McTaggart and Russell remain virtually unchanging and it is not expected that future empirical discoveries are going to have a crucial impact on the credibility of either of those hypotheses.

There are indefinitely many examples from the history of science which illustrate the structure of scientific revolutions in the course of which an old theory being further from the truth is replaced by another through the relentless process whereby the adequacy of the latter steadily grows relative to that of the former. As time goes on and evidence accumulates, more and more complicating hypotheses must be incorporated in the wrong hypothesis in order to keep it afloat. It is only a question when, but at some stage the upholders of the incorrect theory will be too weighed down by the burden of their encumbered theory. Sooner or later, a stage is inevitably reached when the wrong theory is so vastly more entangled with extra hypotheses that it is absolutely clear to all that it does not correspond to data.

For a brief example let us imagine there was a controversy among experts of ancient Ugaritic as to the question what the word "dats" stood for. One group of experts hypothesize that the unusual Ugaritic word stands for "glad" another that "dats"

translates into "sad." As a matter of fact "dats" means "glad" but in the context of mid-19th Century scholarship both hypotheses seem equally credible. Then some ancient Ugaritic scrolls are unearthed and in the first relevant passage they manage to decipher they find it written "... the harvest throughout the land was exceedingly good and consequently the King was dats." The first group would rather be pleased with this discovery for it would seem clear to them that what is being said here is that the King naturally shared the joy of his subjects at their good fortunes. The passage thus confirms their hypotheses that "dats" means "joyful." The second group of experts would not be forced, and would in practice not give up at once their interpretation but would be able to invent an auxiliary hypothesis in the context of which the disconfirming evidence could be neutralized. They might claim that the King was in a peculiar situation in which good harvest throughout the land was liable to distress him. Relying on some vague clues from other documents they may postulate that the King coveted the lands of his neighboring Kingdoms and a disastrous harvest would have provided sufficient incentive for his subjects to be willing to fight a war of expansion.

If no other evidence were forthcoming then the dispute may have remained forever unresolved. A single relevant passage does not have the power to force the errant linguist to abandon his hypothesis. However, if we allow the eventual discovery of indefinitely many other passages which may provide further relevant clues, then it is to be expected that the correct interpretation of "dats" will sooner or later impose itself upon everyone. Indeed other texts were discovered in which the King in question was strongly praised as an unusually peace loving person. This had obviously an adverse effect on the second group of expert's hypothesis who as a result were now forced to come up with some extra explanation why a normally peace loving King could nevertheless desire to start a war on this particular occasion. But then yet other passages affected adversely this new explanation, a difficulty which had to be explained away with some further ad hoc hypothesis. In addition, increasingly more ad hoc hypotheses were required to explain sentences like "the King was very dats when his first son was born" or "The priests were not dats to hear that they will not be granted the gold necessary to build a new temple" and so on which came to light with the discovery of new texts. All these extra explanations with their ad hoc hypotheses on which they were based made the conjecture that "dats" stands for "sad" more and more difficult to

adhere to than to its rival and was therefore abandoned by everyone.

The previous example was fictitious. Back in 1963 I gave an actual example of the dynamic process I am referring to in my *Method in the Physical Sciences* describing the overthrow of flat earth theory. The hypothesis that the earth was flat rather than round was to begin with more plausible but then it gradually became too encumbered by the protective hypotheses that had to be invented in order to explain away such prima facie hostile evidence as provided by the way ships seem to disappear over the horizon, the shape of lunar eclipses and later the apparent circumnavigation of the earth and so on.

Metaphysical hypotheses, on the other hand, seem to describe features of the world that lie further beneath the surface of experience in that they are less inextricably interwoven with the domain of observables wherein lie the clues accessible to us, indicating the nature of these features.

IV

In the last and most important section of this paper, I shall discuss the various known differences between science and metaphysics that follow as consequences from their basic difference that I have tried to describe. In this section, I shall add several points in an effort to clarify what I have said so far.

(1) I did not mean to imply that no future discoveries could ever affect the credibility of any metaphysical hypothesis. For example, with the discovery of the possibility of direct electrical stimulation of certain parts of the brain and thereby inducing very vivid, coherent and sustained impressions of events that do not actually take place in the external world, the skeptical conjecture of Descartes that all our perceptual experiences may lack roots in external reality, a conjecture supported by how things seem to us in our dreams, may gain plausibility. I merely deny the possibility of an indeterminately long series of empirical discoveries systematically and irresistibly pointing in a specific direction.

To give one more example: suppose it were discovered that I had a number of important physical properties that no other humans had. Surely this would be relevant to the inductive argument supporting the belief in the existence of other minds: it would weaken it. As a solipsist I would have reason to claim that my having a mind does not provide very good inductive grounds for claiming that others have it too, since it has been established that I differ significantly from others.

Apart from the fact that in the light of our present state of knowledge we would all judge such a discovery highly unlikely it is also true that it could not provide overwhelming empirical evidence in favor of solipsism. After all I am certainly physically very different from elephants and giraffes. Yet because of some important similarities in the behavior of all animals, anti-solipsists assign to all of them (to different degrees perhaps) the capacity of having sensations, of feeling pain and pleasure and so on.

(2) Neither did I mean to imply that we may not now and then come across observations that seem to militate against the scientific hypothesis which will eventually prevail. For example, the lack of observable parallax effect among the so-called fixed stars seemed to point to the falsity of the Copernican hypothesis that the earth travelled round the sun. Supporters of that hypothesis had to explain this away by the then seemingly quite fantastic ad hoc hypothesis that the distance from here to those stars is so enormous that the earth's orbit is negligibly small relative to it. But I am of course talking about the overall tendency which in all cases seems to be the ever increasing need to explain away evidence hostile to the hypothesis ultimately to be rejected.

(3) According to the view I have expounded there are overwhelming objective forces which impose upon us the acceptance of a given scientific hypothesis. Am I then committed to the position that the views of those influential philosophers who have insisted that scientific progress cannot be accounted for in rational terms and that there are no objective factors which determine whether scientists will discard a given theory and adopt another, are utterly groundless? Not quite. When presented with an instantaneous picture of the existing evidence there may indeed be no rigorous procedure whereby the relative adequacy of competing hypotheses could precisely be assessed. Yet ultimately an objectively grounded decision is possible because of the unmistakably discernible trend over a sufficiently long period of time in the course of which the wrong hypothesis grows increasingly more encumbered by the complexities piled upon it by those who have labored hard to save it. But there is no unique moment when this process of growing entanglement in devices protecting the wrong hypotheses becomes evident. That is why not all switch their support from one hypothesis to another at the same moment. Eventually however virtually all do.

To strengthen my point let us look at what happens when agreement prevails concerning the hypothesis to adopt. Any evidence that may be cited by one

scientist as confirming his belief that the earth is round will be agreed by all other scientists who share his belief that it is objective factor contributing to the credibility of that belief. The same goes for more sophisticated and complex hypotheses. Any evidence that will be cited by some competent scientist as playing a role in replacing Newton's theory by Einstein's will universally be agreed by all scientists as playing such a role. It is entirely different with metaphysical hypotheses. Different philosophers may agree that a belief in the existence of other minds is warranted but the reason cited by one philosopher why this is so, may be denied by another as carrying any weight.

(4) I have cited earlier the fact that the set of observations relevant to the metaphysical problem whether there is a moving NOW has remained virtually unchanged in the last 500 years or so. It might be objected that the same seems to be true in the context of a question like whether there is life on the planets of other solar systems which nevertheless is clearly a scientific problem.

The answer of course is that with respect to the latter question, it is easy to conceive of plenty of evidence that would be relevant. The reason why such evidence has not in fact been forthcoming is simply because the domain of observation containing all the evidence has been inaccessible to us as so far we have no means of communications with the planets in question. With respect to the controversy concerning time it seems that the relevant evidence is to be found in the domain most readily accessible to us, namely, in the domain of all the everyday events which lie in the past, present and the future. Yet in spite of the accessibility of the domain no new evidence has presented itself during all this time to support either side of the dispute.

(5) It is most important to note that should the future surprise us and should it turn out differently from what I claim will happen to typical metaphysical hypotheses, I shall not necessarily be proven wrong. Let us postulate that though the vast widening of our conceptual horizons the question, for example, whether time flows becomes subject, in a way we are incapable of conceiving it today, to the dynamic process to which scientific hypotheses are subject to. In other words, we postulate that successive empirical discoveries seem to point to the correctness of say, McTaggart's position and Russellians become increasingly worn down by the task of having to erect more and more special hypotheses to protect their position. I do not believe that this would show that my thesis was false. It would rather show that what

was thought to be a metaphysical problem turned out in fact to be a scientific problem.

V

The realization of the fundamental difference between science and metaphysics I have outlined, should help us to understand why there are some other important differences between the two disciplines.

(1) Perhaps the most glaring dissimilarity between science and metaphysics is that scientific disputes however sharp are bound to be resolved, while metaphysical controversies go on forever. Indeed, it is this feature of metaphysics that gave the major impetus to the hostile view held by some, that is a barren discipline; that it is a discipline in which all arguments are futile, in which no problem is ever solved; that in spite of the enormous amount of mental energy invested throughout history in metaphysical thinking no real progress has been achieved. In reply to this defenders of metaphysics have contended that their discipline can be credited with substantial gains in as much as original arguments are produced from time to time; that some old arguments have been disposed of for good while some others have been progressively transformed and refined. However, even the staunchest supporters of metaphysics concede that none of the major metaphysical questions yet have an agreed upon answer.

It is understandable why this should be so. Once the basic methodology of science is unquestioningly accepted (which of course may be an act of metaphysical commitment), scientific disputes become subject to the relentless process in the course of which the inadequacy of the wrong hypothesis keeps growing before our eyes. In the case of metaphysical questions on the other hand, if the observational situation to begin with was such as to permit the postulation of different hypotheses then this will not change crucially for the relevant set of observations remains virtually fixed. The only substantial movement that will take place consists in the devising of new arguments but this of course does not occur systematically in one direction only, since one side of a dispute is just as likely to introduce an argument in support of his position as the other. Thus arguments and counterarguments may follow one another indefinitely for the empirical situation remains more or less constant and the relevant set of observations does not undergo any decisive change. The process of ever growing accumulation of encumbrances under

the weight of which one of the disputants must eventually give way does not take place.

(2) It is now easy to see in what sense it may quite justifiably be said that metaphysics deals with far more general propositions than science. We have said that the set of observations relevant for example to the question whether time flows is not going to change substantially with any future discoveries (unless it should turn out that it is not a genuine metaphysical question, after all). In all the infinitely many logically possible worlds in which the future is different from what it is going to be in the actual world, the arguments that seem to support the truth of the claim that time flows will therefore remain unaffected by new observations. Thus an assertion like that time flows if true, is not merely true in the particular world which is the actual world. The assertion expresses a general truth, that is applicable to all the infinitely many worlds which may be vastly different from ours in that they may have any possible futures.

(3) It is agreed that a statement whose truth is guaranteed by the laws of logic is necessarily true. Characteristically, such a statement is true in all possible worlds. Laws of nature, though they are not imposed upon us by logic have nevertheless been thought by many to be in some sense necessary. Karl Popper attempted to explain this by saying:

... a statement may be said to be naturally or physically necessary, if, and only if, it is deducible from a statement function which is satisfied in all worlds that differ from a world, if at all, only with respect to initial conditions.¹⁶

If it is of no concern to us that his definition has been found to conceal a circularity and thus is ultimately useless.¹⁷ What is of interest to us is that the assumption on which Popper's assertion is based, confirms as reasonable the view that a statement S which does not merely happen to be true in the actual world but has to be true in an infinitely large class of other worlds (except of course when this is so merely in the class of worlds characterized as "all the worlds in which S is true") has a kind of necessity. Metaphysical statements may then even with more reason be said to be necessary: if they are true they are true in all worlds with pasts similar to ours and whose future may be anything. We have then a

vindication of the view expressed by a number of philosophers (e.g. Campbell op. cit. p. 5) that metaphysics deals with necessary truth.

(4) An individual is generally thought to have accidental and essential properties. According to a widely held view essential properties are those which an individual possesses not merely in the actual world but in all the logically possible worlds in which it exists. Metaphysical statements refer to features of the world that are present in all the worlds that have been sufficiently similar to ours up till now for the question of their existence to have arisen and which may have any logically possible future. Metaphysicians may therefore be said to be dealing with the essential features of the universe. This has indeed been maintained by many philosophers from B. Blanshard, who regarded metaphysics to be a vitally important enterprise and who said¹⁸ that it "requires a focussing in the mental eye on invisible and impalpable essences" to a hostile philosopher like Carnap who claimed to have eliminated the scope of metaphysics which he characterized as the search for "knowledge of the essence of things."¹⁹

(5) If metaphysics deals with "invisible and impalpable essences" and thus requires "the focussing in the mental eye" then it deals with features that exist in our thoughts alone. It is not unreasonable then to claim, what we have seen in a previous section, that it has been claimed that "metaphysics is thought about thought-about-the-world; it is talk about talk-about-the-world."

Campbell's assertion quoted before that "the very task metaphysics sets itself is to pierce the veil of appearance, to pass beyond how things seem, to reach to the basic, inner and perhaps hidden part of the world" strikes us no longer so strange. If metaphysicians are not concerned with features of the universe which merely happen to belong to it, but features that must belong to a vast set of possible universes—where of course the set is not here for us to examine directly—then indeed, they are trying to reach something that lies hidden beyond the veil of appearance.

(6) There is often talk about metaphysical systems. The implication is that metaphysical problems are not solved piecemeal but that, since they all bear upon each other, their solution forms an intercon-

¹⁶ *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1959), p. 433.

¹⁷ Cf. G. C. Nerlich & W. A. Suchling "Popper on Law and Natural Necessity" *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 18 (1967), pp. 233-5.

¹⁸ "In Defense of Metaphysics" in *Metaphysics* ed. by W. E. Kennick & M. Lazerowitz (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 135.

¹⁹ "The Elimination of Metaphysics" in *Logical Positivism* ed. by A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, 1959), p. 80.

nected whole. Heidegger in his essay "What is Metaphysics" says:

... every metaphysical question always covers the whole range of metaphysical problems.²⁰

This may look somewhat puzzling. What on the surface seems there be the connection between say the problem of universals and the problem of free will? But after our previous discussion perhaps the claim appears not entirely without foundation. We have seen that the essence of the metaphysical enterprise is the devising of arguments to support or overthrow other arguments. Because of the centrality of reasoning as opposed to observations it is not surprising to find in metaphysical writings as indeed in all philosophical writings, in addition to argument forms that are common in the sciences also forms of reasoning that are not employed in the latter e.g. the transcendental argument, infinite regress argument in all the great variety of versions that different philosophers subscribe to. A given philosopher may have a predilection for a certain type of argument which he may systematically apply to a variety of topics; there exists such a thing as a characteristic personal style of philosophizing. Thus while the contents of metaphysical hypotheses may well be independent of one another they may be supported by a set of arguments that form an interrelated system.

(7) In conclusion we may say a few words about the views of those who have been antagonistic to the whole enterprise of metaphysics and have held—

basically in agreement with Hume—that the pronouncements of metaphysicians do not "contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact or existence" and advised to commit all their works to the flames. On reading the detailed attacks of positivists like Ayer and Carnap one is struck by the fact that the examples they hold up for ridicule are sentences which are objectionable not because they are unverifiable but because they do not seem intelligible at all and which by no means are paradigmatic of metaphysical sentences many of us find to touch upon indispensably vital issues of concern. It would seem that they are condemning only some very vague and ill-defined metaphysical sentences. Be it as it may, the positivistic observation that metaphysical sentences are unverifiable in principle, does apply to all metaphysical sentences if the verification of an hypothesis is to be understood in the very strong sense of experience unequivocally forcing us to accept that hypothesis. It is always possible to pile up an overwhelming amount of evidence for the truth or falsity of down-to-earth empirical hypotheses that concern facts which lie near enough to the surface of immediate experience to be thoroughly intertwined with everyday observations which carry innumerable many clues to these facts. The same is not possible in the case of metaphysical hypotheses which concern facts whose ties to the domain of observations is of a limited number and may be given conflicting interpretations as to the direction in which they point.

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²⁰ *Existence and Being* (London, 1956), p. 355.