



“THE DEATH OF METAPHYSICS” AS METAMETAPHYSICS¹

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Over the years, many philosophers have proclaimed the death of metaphysics, the death of that area of philosophy concerned with the study of reality as such. But what exactly do they mean by this? What does this death-of-metaphysics idea imply? In this paper, I offer a way to articulate this idea by formulating it as a metametaphysical thesis about the non-substantivity of metaphysical claims. I argue that given this formulation such a metametaphysical thesis seems implausible.

In de loop der jaren hebben veel filosofen de dood van de metafysische uitgeroepen, de dood van de filosofie die zich bezighoudt met de studie van de realiteit als zodanig. Maar wat bedoelen ze nu precies? Wat betekent dit idee van de dood van de metafysica? In dit document kan ik dit idee verwoorden door het te formuleren als een meta-metafysische stelling over de niet-wezenlijke betekenis van metafysische beweringen. Ik ben van mening dat een dergelijke meta-metafysische stelling gezien deze formulering onwaarschijnlijk lijkt.

Im Laufe der Jahre haben viele Philosophen den Tod der Metaphysik verkündet, den Tod dieses Bereichs der Philosophie, der sich mit der Erforschung der Realität als solche beschäftigt. Aber was genau meinen sie damit? Was bedeutet diese Idee des Todes der Metaphysik? In diesem Artikel biete ich eine Möglichkeit, diese Idee zu artikulieren, indem ich sie als metaphysische These über die Unbegründbarkeit metaphysischer Behauptungen formuliere. Ich argumentiere, dass angesichts dieser Formulierung eine solche metametaphysische These nicht plausibel erscheint.





I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, many philosophers have pronounced the death of metaphysics, the death of that philosophical enterprise, which inquires about the most general and most fundamental features of reality. Perhaps, we could include in this list of death-of-metaphysics philosophers a varied class of philosophers ranging from Heidegger, Derrida, and the social constructivist, on the one hand, to the logical positivists, Wittgenstein, and the metaphysical deflationists, on the other. But what does this pronouncement really imply? What does it mean to say that metaphysics is dead?

I do not think that this death-of-metaphysics idea implies that no one in the world is doing metaphysics anymore. If one were to browse the *PhilPapers* website, one of the largest (and up-to-date) databases of philosophical researches on the internet, one would find more than 60,000 works in metaphysics and other related disciplines.² Many of these were just published in the last 10 years or so. Surely, the death-of-metaphysics idea does not imply that no philosopher is working on metaphysical topics anymore.

¹ Different versions of this paper were presented at the following venues: Philosophical Association of the Philippines 2010 National Conference, Miriam College; Claro Ceniza 2011 Metaphysics Conference, De La Salle University; Contemporary Philosophy 2011 Workshop, Bicol University; Philosophical Association of the Philippines-Asian Association of Christian Philosophers 2012 Joint Conference, Ateneo de Manila University; Australasian Association of Philosophy 2012 Conference, Wollongong University; Current Trends in Philosophy 2013 Seminar, De La Salle University; Australasian Association of Logic 2013 Conference, University of Melbourne; Horace Silliman 2014 Lecture, Silliman University; Metametaphysics 2014 Workshop, Kyoto University; Philippine National Philosophical Research Society 2014 Lecture Series, San Beda College; and, the Australasian Association of Philosophy 2015 Conference, Macquarie University. I would like to thank the participants of these events for their useful feedback. My thanks go to Robert James Boyles, David Chalmers, Mark Anthony Dacela, Alan Hajek, Napoleon Mabaquiao, L. Nathan Oaklander, Theodore Sider, Jonathan Schaffer, Brenton Welford, and the editors of this journal who have been generous in providing useful comments and suggestions. Thanks also to Raj Mansukhani, James Franklin, and Brian Garrett for going over previous versions of this work. Special thanks to Hazel T. Biana for the time well spent in developing the main themes of this paper. Research leading to this work was funded by De La Salle University's Research Coordination Office under the New PhD Program (URCO 13 N1 11).

² To check the statistics, please see <http://www.philpapers.org/>.

Furthermore, I also do not think that this pronouncement implies that metaphysics is no longer relevant in this day and age. For one, the phrase “no longer relevant” is wanting of precision. When do we say that some pursuit is no longer relevant? That is, how irrelevant is being irrelevant? Is it when people stop engaging in it? Obviously, this is not true of metaphysics! Or is it when no sign of progress is seen in pursuing it? This *might* be true of metaphysics. But not until we give a precise understanding of what “progress” means could we give an indictment of the non-relevance of metaphysics. Furthermore, our understanding of what “progress” means might give us a negative indictment of the relevance not only of metaphysics, but of philosophy in general.³

It now seems that we are in a deep muddle. It seems that we cannot really spell out what this death-of-metaphysics idea is really about. It does not cash out either as the no-one-is-doing-metaphysics claim, or as the metaphysics-is-no-longer-relevant claim. But what then could this death-of-metaphysics idea imply?

I think that this death-of-metaphysics idea implies a certain kind of anti-realist (or deflationist) intuition, indeed a suspicion, towards any pursuit of metaphysics. This intuition has a long history and philosophical pedigree, and it goes roughly as follows: Metaphysics is a theoretical dead-end, a concrete manifestation of a theoretical impasse of *jargonic* proportions.

I divide this paper into two main parts. In the first part, I discuss what the death-of-metaphysics idea is all about, and how this fits in the current discussion in metametaphysics—the study of the epistemology and methodology of metaphysics. Then I characterize and motivate

³ David Chalmers, “Verbal Disputes,” *The Philosophical Review* 120, (2011): 475–513.



two general metametaphysical positions which have been identified in the literature: namely, metaphysical realism, which takes metaphysical issues as serious, substantive issues; and, metaphysical anti-realism, which takes, for varying reasons, metaphysical issues as non-substantive, theoretical impasses.⁴ In the second part, I explore the anti-realist position and discuss three anti-metaphysical projects, which sprung from this position. I show that the anti-realist position is unmotivated, and thus, could not dissuade us from being realists about metaphysical inquiry. As a consequence, I argue that the currently in vogue anti-metaphysical projects, which many philosophy enthusiasts accept, are unmotivated as well.

II. METAPHYSICAL REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM, AND THE DEATH OF METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics is often introduced to newbie philosophers as the philosophical study concerned with the most general and most fundamental aspects of reality (at least, this is how metaphysics has been traditionally characterized in most textbooks.⁵ Questions about the nature of reality, the existence of abstract entities, the reality of time, and the identity of physical objects are all included in a typical, traditional metaphysics syllabus. But as soon as these newbies delve into the thick of some metaphysical question, they might wonder whether there is really something at issue here, something that is of great importance.⁶

⁴ Different philosophers offer different ways of describing these positions. For example, in “What is Ontological Realism?,” *Philosophical Compass* 5, (2010): 880-890, Carrie Jenkins argues that the term, “realism” is opaque and inherits a lot of conceptual baggage. Compare this with David Chalmers, “Ontological Anti-Realism,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundation of Ontology*, edited by David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 77-129.

⁵ Ironically, this “traditional characterization” is known in the metametaphysics literature as *mainstream metaphysics*, see Theodore Sider, “Ontological Realism,” in *Metametaphysics*, 384-423.

⁶ Compare with David Manley, “Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics” in *Metametaphysics*, 1-37.

Consider this metaphysical conundrum about mereology, the metaphysics of parts and wholes, a *hot* topic in today’s metaphysical researches: Given that we have simple objects, e.g., atoms in a given space-time region, what does it take for there to be a further object that has those simple objects as parts? When can we say that these atoms compose a further object?

Metaphysicians offer differing answers to this conundrum:

1. Extreme Nihilists: Composition never takes place—there are simples arranged in the shape of cats and tables, but there are no cats and tables, strictly speaking.
2. Universalists: Composition always takes place—not only are there cats and tables, but there are also cat-tables (entities, which are part-cat and part-table).
3. Mild Nihilists: Composition only takes place when it brings about life—still no tables, but at least we have cats.

A lot of ink has been spilled discussing this issue, but any newbie confronted with this problem will be dumbfounded and almost always, if you may excuse the expression, *stupidified* by the amount of effort metaphysicians make to theorize about it. One newbie might say, “It seems that nothing really is at issue here—nothing of substance is being discussed.” Another might ask, “Can we really decide which of these theories is right?” Still another might remark, “This is just a trivial matter; there is just no objective way of deciding this”. For a serious metaphysician, something important and non-trivial is at issue here since what is at stake is something about a facet of reality. For the metaphysician, there is an objective way to decide which theory is right. Despite what our serious metaphysician thinks, however, many of us would still have the same intuitions as our metaphysics newbies. So the question is: why do we have these initial impressions about metaphysics?



Three anti-realist intuitions seem to come into play whenever people, even some metaphysicians, are confronted with difficult metaphysical questions such as the problem considered above. First, there is the suspicion that these questions are really misguided. Nothing substantive is at issue; they appear to be merely verbal issues. The debate about what metaphysical story of mereology is the *right* one almost amounts to the same debate about what metaphysical story of the nature of fists is the right one. If one looks at a clenched hand, and asks whether some object called a “fist” has come into existence, one may wonder if this is even a substantive issue, since the fact which really matters is right in front of him. Furthermore, he might have the impression that what is involved is a merely verbal issue of whether to *call* a clenched hand (*viz.*, a fist), a temporarily existing object.⁷

Much in the same way, we could look at the issue about mereology as a non-substantive one: it is not concerned with whether composition happens in reality; it is just concerned with whether we should *call* simple objects arranged table-wise “tables”. That is, these are just issues of semantics, issues of terminological usage, and not issues about anything in reality.

A related anti-realist intuition implies the idea that though we could take metaphysical issues as substantive and not merely as verbal ones, it is still theoretically unproductive to pursue them. This idea is grounded on the premise that these issues could be easily resolved in a very straightforward and commonsensical manner. That is, metaphysical questions only yield trivial answers, and hence are easily solvable. Consider the question about the existence of numbers.

Philosophers since Plato have asked about the existence of numbers. Are numbers real? Or are they merely conventional signs as nominalists have claimed? But this metaphysical conundrum vanishes under the watchful eyes of an anti-realist. For him, there is no question about the existence of numbers; it is simply a matter of asking how we draw out the metaphysical conclusion that numbers exist from a set of truisms that we all accept. For example, from the truism that the number of my fingers is finite, we could get the conclusion that there is at least one number.⁸ This is a valid metaphysical argument that “proves” the existence of numbers. But though valid, it still is, more or less, trivial and uninformative.

Some would claim that the case of the metaphysics of time is another example of the triviality of metaphysical issues. The metaphysics of time is one of the most perplexing metaphysical problems ever asked by philosophers: What is time? Is time real? An anti-realist who embraces trivialities would again not worry about this problem. For him, it is simply a trivial fact that the claim that “There is time” follows from the truism that “I had breakfast this morning”. Again, the question whether time is real yields a trivial answer. The triviality of metaphysical pursuits comes in different forms and sizes, but at the bottom of it all is the anti-realist intuition that metaphysical questions, though substantive, almost always yield trivial answers, and, as such are not worth pursuing anymore.

A third anti-realist intuition is grounded on epistemic considerations. The idea roughly goes as follows: though metaphysical questions are substantive, and do not just yield trivial answers, there is simply no evidence, no fact of the matter, which warrants the correctness

⁷ Eli Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” *Philosophical Issues* 12, (2002): 67.

⁸ Manley, “Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics,” 26.





of any metaphysical answer. That is, we simply do not have any epistemic grounds to accept any metaphysical claim. Nor do we have any epistemic access to metaphysical truths. As such, it would not be worthwhile, and would really be counterproductive, to pursue these metaphysical questions. Of the three anti-realist intuitions, this I think is the hardest nut to crack. Let me spell out this intuition some more.

Consider this metaphysical debate between a theist and an atheist:

Thomas: God exists because... (provides the five cosmological proofs).

Bertrand: No, God does not exist because... (provides objections against the five proofs).

Thomas: Yes, he does... (gives replies to the objections).

Bertrand: No, he does not (gives rebuttals to the replies to the objections).

The debate goes on, ad infinitum...

The debate about the existence of God is a classic case of a theoretical impasse in metaphysics. Both the theist and the atheist do not appear to have a merely verbal squabble, since the terminologies used in the debate are accepted by both parties. Nor are they just making trivial claims about God's existence, since both the theist and the atheist have different metaphysical pictures of reality (one has God in it, the other does not have it). They are engaged in a real, substantive debate; a debate which, for the anti-realist about metaphysics, is pointless to pursue, since both are in a dire metaphysical deadlock, and there is no further evidence, no fact of the matter that could settle the issue once and for all, and swing the impasse in either direction.

If metaphysical debates were to reach such a deadlock, they would run into a calamitous theoretical impasse where there is simply no way of adjudicating between the rival theories.

Consider the case of mereology again. Granted that the differing mereological theories are in a theoretical impasse, there seems to be no evidence, which would shift the favor to either nihilism or universalism. There is simply no fact of the matter by which we could settle which theory is right, and which is wrong.

The same is true, perhaps, of the debate about the nature of minds. Are minds just brains? Or are they something over and above brains? It might be the case that "there is no good reason to think that empirical evidence can break the tie either".⁹

Philosophers who have pronounced the death of metaphysics I think are motivated by one or more of these three anti-realist intuitions about the whole enterprise of traditional metaphysics. In summary, these intuitions are as follows:

1. Metaphysical issues are merely verbal issues;
2. Metaphysical questions yield trivial answers; and,
3. There is simply no fact of the matter to settle metaphysical impasses.

To my mind, these intuitions promote certain kinds of (negative) attitudes, mostly frustration and indifference, toward any form of metaphysical inquiry: be it about the existence and identity of objects and persons, the nature and essential features of space and time, the nature of causation, the existence of free will, or whatnot. But not only do these anti-realist intuitions promote adverse attitudes towards metaphysics, they also inspire a certain type of skepticism about the whole metaphysical enterprise itself, a kind of global skepticism about the very possibility of having a correct metaphysical theory of what reality is really like. To put it in Plato's metaphor, this puts into

⁹ Katalin Balog, "In Defense of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84, (2012): 1-23.





question the very possibility of having a correct way of “carving reality at its natural joints”.

A further implication of these anti-realist intuitions is that they seem to be the driving force behind some of the anti-metaphysical projects which are popular in recent philosophical literature. These projects are anti-metaphysical in that they deny the possibility of studying the most general and most fundamental aspects of reality.¹⁰ That is, each of these anti-metaphysical projects claims that metaphysics, as has traditionally been conceived, is not possible. Not that I am saying that all anti-realists about metaphysics took one of these anti-metaphysical projects. Rather, I am just claiming that these anti-metaphysical projects seem to be deeply motivated by some anti-realist intuition or another. I will consider three such projects here, but I will reserve my polemics against them until the next section.

The first anti-metaphysical project I will consider is the social constructivist project. For social constructivists, metaphysics is not possible, since, for them, it is just a product of the long history of western intellectual thought, an artifact of an old intellectual regime obsessed with “grand narratives”, a regime which is now dead. For them, we have to do away with the old concepts of “objective truth” and “objective reality,” since they are merely constructs of an old human convention. Truth and reality are just culture-bound, mind-dependent categories, which can altogether be done away with, since cultures and conventions change over time.

Furthermore, they believe that each claim to truth is as good as any other. This then implies that there is no way of adjudicating between rival claims to truth, since each is as good as the other.

For example, if one culture espouses a kind of ontology which accepts the existence of evil spirits, while another denies them, nothing in the world could ever provide evidence for either side. A given ontology is on the same theoretical footing as any other. As such, for social constructivists, nothing is really out there for metaphysicians to discover; there is simply no fundamental structure of reality, no first principles, no nothing!

The second anti-metaphysical project stems from the first two anti-realist intuitions explained above: namely, the idea that metaphysical issues are merely verbal and that metaphysical questions yield trivial answers. Everyone knows that the logical positivist program is anti-metaphysical. For them, if you want to know what reality really is, you should not go to metaphysicians; you should go to scientists instead. Metaphysics can only give you a tiring mental exercise, and not theories of what reality is really like. Logical positivists claim that only science could give you the facts about the world, and metaphysics could only give you a bunch of poetic phrases which just appear to depict what reality is really like. This is not to say, however, that philosophy no longer has any value. For logical positivists, metaphysics cannot tell you what reality is like, but it does not follow that philosophy has no use. Philosophy is useful in that it provides an ample way of analyzing the viability of scientific theories. It is the job of the philosopher to analyze the concepts used in the sciences and show the consistency and coherence of a given scientific theory. These are all done in order to make the whole scientific enterprise free from ambiguities and contradictions. In this conception, philosophy is, to paraphrase Locke, the “under laborer of the sciences”. But this conception, yet again, does away with the traditional conception of metaphysics.

¹⁰ E. J. Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity, and Time*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3-9.





The last anti-metaphysical project I will consider is revisionist in nature. Friends of this project claim that metaphysics, as traditionally conceived, is not possible because we cannot really know what reality really is in-itself. For them, all that we could be certain of are the necessary features of our thoughts about reality—the way we understand reality—but not reality itself. As such, a true metaphysics should not be about the necessary elements of reality; it should rather be about the necessary elements of human thought and understanding. For example, in perceiving objects, it is necessary that we perceive them as objects in time and space—time and space taken here as categories which make perception possible and not as essential features of reality.

However different these three projects are, they all radically depart from what we ordinarily think of as metaphysics. For many supporters of these projects, an inquiry about the fundamental nature of things (or of reality as a whole) is a dead-end project. No amount of philosophical skill and ingenuity could ever give us what reality is ultimately like. For them, the conception of metaphysics as an inquiry about the most general and most fundamental features of reality is *passé*. Such an inquiry should no longer be taken seriously. At most, we could engage in it only for a sense of philosophical nostalgia, but not as a serious inquiry into the very fabric of reality.

Having all these anti-realist intuitions and anti-metaphysical projects in mind, it is now relatively easy to present what realism about metaphysics is all about. Realism about metaphysics is the claim that metaphysics (construed as the study of the fundamental structure of reality) is a serious philosophical enterprise, a worthy intellectual pursuit. As we shall see later, however, there are different conceptions of what a realist framework ought to be. Be that as it may, three theses are common among all realists:

1. There is one best candidate meaning of **existence** or the existential quantifier. (Or in medieval philosophical jargon, “being” is a univocal concept).
2. Metaphysical questions are serious, substantial questions (in that they are not merely verbal, and they do not just yield trivial answers).
3. Ontological facts are objective. (There are facts of the matter which metaphysics discovers, and they are out there as mind-independent facts).¹¹

Notice that these theses are diametrically opposed to the three anti-realist intuitions I have given above. I will not argue for these realist theses, however. Rather, I will hold them as assumptions that a realist holds. But I want to persuade you to become realists (or at least cast some shadow of doubt on anti-realism). But since I treat realism’s theses as assumptions, my task now is to show you that the anti-realist intuitions are unfounded, and that the anti-metaphysical projects implied by them do not really hold water.

III. POLEMICS AGAINST THE ANTI-REALIST INTUITIONS

Let me start by considering the first anti-realist intuition: namely, that metaphysical issues are merely verbal. I think that it is prudent here to give a general characterization of what it means for an issue to be a merely verbal one. An issue is merely verbal when the disputing parties think that they are disagreeing over some factual matter, but in fact they are just talking past each other. That is, the issue at stake is not substantial, but just a matter of semantics, or of how words and concepts are being used in the debate. Examples of this abound not just in philosophy, but also in everyday life.

¹¹ Compare this list with Jenkins, “What is Ontological Realism?”





Consider this disagreement between Ludwig and Alfred:

Ludwig: A ruler is 12 inches long.

Alfred: No, a ruler is the head of some political institution.

It is easy to see why this is merely a verbal, and not a substantive, dispute. Ludwig and Alfred are using the word, “ruler” in two different senses: one as a measuring device and the other as a political figure head. Their dispute is easily remedied just by clarifying what the concepts really mean. After doing this, their dispute vanishes.

Here is another example of an easily resolvable issue:

Tourist: It is hot here.

Native: No, it is not hot here.

At first glance, the tourist and the native appear to have a disagreement about the temperature in a certain place, but appearances can be deceiving.¹² Let us suppose that both disputants are in Tagaytay, one of the cooler places in the Philippines, enjoying a casual walk in a late January afternoon. Suppose further that the tourist is from Russia (where the temperature at this time of year goes below zero degrees), while our native is from Manila (where the temperature is typically warm). Having these considerations in mind, we will see that the tourist and the native are not really making contradictory claims about the temperature in Tagaytay. They are merely using “hot” in a very context-dependent way.

These two cases are clear cut cases of merely verbal issues. But can we say the same thing

about metaphysical issues? Can we claim that disputants just appear to be involved in a substantive metaphysical issue when in fact they are just talking past each other?

Consider the case of mereology: How many things are in a given spatiotemporal region given that there are two simple things present?

Universalist: There are three things there.

Nihilist: No, there are not three things there.

If the universalist and the nihilist just have a merely verbal dispute, then there is a way of identifying where the confusion lies, much like in the ruler case and the tourist/native case. At first glance, however, it seems that the dispute between the universalist and the nihilist cannot easily be remedied the same way as the two previous cases of verbal disputes. But the anti-realist is up for this task.

An anti-realist might say that what makes this dispute merely verbal is that there is an ambiguity with the word, “thing”. Universalists might be using the word differently from how the nihilist is using it. OK, fair enough! But let us suppose that we could somehow do away with the word, “thing” and translate their dispute as follows:

Universalist: There is a mereological fusion of two simples in the region.

Nihilist: No, there is no mereological fusion; there are only two simples in the region.

The apparent *cause* of the disagreement now disappears, but did the dispute disappear as well? Not really. In translating away the word “thing”, the *real* disagreement between the universalist and the nihilist was made more explicit: one claims that mereological fusions exist, the other denies it. So, the dispute remains. How would the anti-realist respond?

¹² Manley, “Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics,” 9.





Some anti-realists suggest that what causes the apparent disagreement is the existential quantifier, “there is” and its other cognates: “exists”, “to be”, etc. Roughly the idea is that when the universalist claims that “There is a mereological fusion” her use of “there is” is much wider in scope than that of when the nihilist claims that “There are only two simples”. That is, their disagreement lies on how they use the existential quantifier, or in technical terms, their disagreement lies mainly on what entities the existential quantifier ranges over. This is what anti-realist calls as “quantifier variance” or “**existence** variance”.

Suppose that we have two circles where one is within the circumference of the other. Let us assume that the area inside the inner circle refers to all things that the nihilist considers to exist. And since for her, composition (or mereological fusion) never happens, all that exists are simples. Suppose that the area of the outer circle (and this includes the whole area of the inner circle) refers to all things that the universalist considers to exist. Since she accepts that composition always happens, not only does she accept the existence of simples, she also accepts the existence mereological fusions of simples as part of his ontology. The **existence** variance thesis, employed by anti-realists, holds that there would be no substantive disagreement between the nihilist and the universalist, given that each holds a different set of existing entities (or different range of the existential quantifier). And since the universalist’s use of the quantifier subsumes that of the nihilist, then granted that the nihilist would acknowledge this, the dispute between them disappears.¹³

But does the **existence** variance thesis show that the dispute about mereology is merely

verbal? No, it does not. For one, the nihilist will surely not acknowledge any terminological mistake here: “there is” just means existence *simpliciter*. He does not accept mereological fusions in his ontology and no one could force him to admit them there either; but neither could a universalist deny the existence of these fusions in her own ontology. She cannot deny something she is committed to. Thus, we see that dispute still remains: either mereological fusions (composite objects) exist as our universalist claims, or they do not as our nihilist claims. Both are making substantive claims about what exists. As such, we are assured that not all metaphysical issues are merely verbal, since the issue about mereology remains to be a substantive one.

How about the anti-realist intuition that metaphysical questions yield trivial answers? Could we just say that though metaphysical disputes are substantive, the answers we will have for them are still trivial?

Some anti-realists have the idea that since metaphysical questions yield trivial answers, then we might as well not pursue them anymore. To illustrate this further, let us go back to the case of the metaphysics of time: whether time is real. The triviality intuition comes in when we see that the metaphysical thesis that time is real could be derived from the truism that I had breakfast this morning. The underlying motivation of this intuition is that when one accepts a thesis from truisms, it will make that thesis a truism as well. In which case, there is a sort of transference of triviality from premise to conclusion. But is this the case about the metaphysical thesis that time is real?

Upon closer inspection, the starting premise is not really a truism: it is a highly questionable metaphysical claim about the existence of the past. At least this is how some metaphysicians of

¹³ This is just a rough exposition of the **existence** variance thesis. For a more detailed exposition, see Sider, “Ontological Realism.”, sec. 4.





time, e.g., the presentists will see it. (Presentists deny the reality of the past and of the future). The premise that I had breakfast this morning might look like a mere truism. But further metaphysical investigation will reveal that this is really a claim about the reality of the past—a metaphysical claim which needs further justification. As such, the triviality intuition would not push through, at least in the case of the metaphysics of time.

Anti-realists have a ready reply to this. The triviality intuition could be rendered as a conditional rather than as a categorical statement. The idea goes roughly as follows: *If* metaphysical theses could be inferred from truisms, then it would make those theses truisms as well. Thus, *if* some metaphysical claim Y is derived from truism X, then Y will be a truism much like X. But I do not know how this *conditionalization* of the triviality intuition could help the anti-realist's cause. I do not see how truisms could escape metaphysical assumptions. And granted that some truisms are metaphysics-free, the conditional form of the triviality intuition just weakens the intuition to the effect that it loses its anti-realist bite. For one, the conditional seems plainly wrong. The dog takes it as a truism that it is fed every morning, but if it was smarter it would realize that there is a system causing that. The conditions of possibility of truisms need not be truisms.

We go finally to the third anti-realist intuition about metaphysics: namely, that there is no fact of the matter which could help settle (or resolve) metaphysical impasses. Recall that metaphysical impasses happen when disputing metaphysical theories come into a theoretical deadlock where the only way to break it is if some evidence, some fact of the matter, will favor one theory over the other. And since (under present metaphysical methodologies) there is simply no way of adjudicating between rival theories in a

theoretical deadlock, it is better, then, not pursue the matter altogether.

Before giving an objection against this intuition, some clarifications are in order first. For one, the no-fact-of-the-matter intuition is an epistemic consideration and not really a metaphysical one. This is an important point since not all metaphysical claims have direct epistemic grounds, much like not all epistemic grounds imply metaphysical claims. An example of the latter case is Hume's denial of the existence of a persisting self. His argument for this is as follows:

1. I cannot see my Self.
2. I cannot hear my Self.
3. I cannot touch my Self.
4. I have no impression of my Self.
5. Therefore, there is no such a thing as a Self.

The premises here are all epistemic ones, that is, they are about what we know. The conclusion, however, is a metaphysical one, that is, it is a claim about what reality is ultimately like. We do have *prima facie* grounds to admit this argument's validity. But upon further investigation, we could still show that the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises since it might be the case that the ground for the existence of a persisting self is independent of the evidence that provides us with our epistemic warrant. So, the conclusion might be false, but the premises are still true.

On the other hand, metaphysical claims might have no *direct* epistemic grounding, but could nonetheless be indirectly proven. Consider the thesis that time without change is possible (a direct opposition to the natural intuition that time necessarily involves change). It is impossible to have direct evidence for this, since it is impossible for us to observe time without





observing change. But though this is the case, we could still somehow provide an indirect way of proving that time without change is possible.

In “Time without Change,” Sydney Shoemaker imagines a world divided into three spatial regions: A, B, and C.¹⁴ Inhabitants of each these regions experience a local freeze which halts all processes. At least that is how it appears to observers from other unfrozen regions. During the freeze, it is impossible for anything to pass into the frozen region, but after the freeze, it is as if no freeze occurred in that region unless they observe that things from the other regions have changed instantaneously. Each of the three regions experiences these freezes, but at different intervals as evidenced by inhabitants of some unfrozen region. Region A freezes every three years, region B every 4 years, while region C every 5 years. As this is a natural recurring phenomenon, there is some reason for the inhabitants of that world to infer, via a simple mathematical deduction, that every sixty years, all three regions freeze simultaneously. But this shows that time is possible without change, since time has elapsed even if there are moments of global freeze in that world—a global freeze implying that no change happened in that world. Furthermore, this inference is not arrived at by direct evidence, but by a mathematical inference. Thus, it shows that we could have an indirect proof for the possibility of time without change.

The moral to draw from this is as follows. Though there are theoretical impasses in metaphysics where no fact of the matter could help us adjudicate between rival theories, it does not follow that we could not have a different ground for accepting or rejecting one theory over another. One such ground is the modal feature

of a metaphysical thesis. Any claim to necessity or possibility (as most metaphysical theses claim to be) could be evidenced by an appeal to an indirect conceptual (a priori) test, like in the Shoemaker case.

Furthermore, theoretical impasses show us the limits of the current methodologies in metaphysics. Some metaphysical questions are tractable, others are not. Those which result into a deadlock could be assessed using other grounds: grounds used in evaluating scientific theories. We have learned from the philosophy of science that the viability of a scientific theory is assessed not only in terms of its ability to be empirically adequate, but also in terms of its simplicity, explanatory power, and consistency. And these could also be used in assessing metaphysical theories as well. This is not to say, however, that metaphysics is just science. Science has a realm, which metaphysics cannot enter (like the realm of nomological possibilities and necessities), and metaphysics has a realm which science cannot enter (like the realm of metaphysical and/or conceptual possibilities and necessities).

Finally, this is not to say that no objective fact could ever settle a metaphysical impasse. It might be true now that we could not locate the facts, which would resolve some of today’s metaphysical impasses. But it is possible that sometime in the future we might develop a more sophisticated metaphysical methodology to determine the relevant facts needed. Of course the current epistemic worries in metaphysics should not deter us from doing serious work in metaphysics; much in the same way that the current technological worries should not deter scientists to do their work. Metaphysicians, like natural scientists, would like to have an epistemic ground for their speculations—even if such epistemic ground is still forthcoming.

¹⁴ Sydney Shoemaker, “Time without Change,” *Journal of Philosophy* 66, (1969): 363-381.





In this last part of this section, I aim to provide a short polemic against the anti-metaphysical projects I have considered above—in the hope to persuade those who are inclined to accept these projects to reconsider their position. I will start first with the social constructivist project.

If for social constructivists “truth” and “reality” are just culture-bound, mind-dependent categories, then no theory is better than any other. But then again, if they are making a theory about truth and reality, then there is no reason for us to hold that their theory is better than any other. That is, we have no reason to accept the social constructivist mind-dependence thesis as true, since their theory is just as good or as bad as any other.

Furthermore, the very idea that reality is just a mind-dependent phenomenon seems to border on absurdity. No one will deny that the planetary movement in the solar system existed long before any human being ever existed, and will long exist after human beings cease to exist. Planets move not because of us; they move and exist independent of how we conceive of them. That is, contra these social constructivists, there is still a mind-independent reality out there that we could discover, a reality that metaphysics aims to understand.

What of the logical positivist project? Logical positivists take science as the best way to understand what reality is ultimately like. But this takes for granted that even science makes metaphysical assumptions and ontological posits. They make ontological posits like the existence quantum manifold spaces and bizarre entities like spinning quarks and eleven dimensions of strings. Philosophical inquiry, especially of a metaphysical sort, should be employed to test the viability of these posits and assumptions. Metaphysicians should test whether spinning

quarks are fundamental entities or just derivative ones, whether manifold spaces are real spaces or just theoretical shortcuts, etc.

Another point against this project is that philosophy, especially metaphysics, is not just concerned with the analysis of concepts or the logical structure of theories. It is also concerned with whether the theory carves reality at its natural joints. This joint-carving business is not just the business of science. Science carves the joints of what is observable in reality; the metaphysician carves not only the joints of what is, but also of *possibilia*, or what could be. In carving the whole metaphysical terrain (even *possibilia*), the metaphysician helps us see what our reality is.

What of the revisionist perspective? I just have one point against this revisionist project. Friends of this project claim that all that we could be certain about are the necessary features of our thought about reality, and not reality itself. But is not the case that we are part of reality? As such, we could still be certain of at least one aspect of reality: namely, ourselves. Not unless one is willing to deny that we are existing things in the world, or not unless one wants to change our meaning of “existence” and of “being a part of,” could we really maintain this sort of project without entailing a huge contradiction.

Some have claimed that the revisionist project provides us with certain undeniable truths about ourselves: that we are finite creatures, that we are all going to die, or that we are embodied entities. But this is an overestimation of its main results. Yes, this project tells us about our “being-in-the-world”, but I do not see how this really affects a realist view of metaphysics: the view that there is a fundamental structure of reality out there independent of our minds, which could be nonetheless studied and pursued.





IV. CONCLUSION

My overall aim in this paper is to show that after everything has been said and done about this whole idea of the “death of metaphysics”, we could still take metaphysics seriously. I hope that I have done that. But then again you might still have some anti-realist intuitions about the project of uncovering the very fundamental structure of reality. If you still do, then present a case for these intuitions; let us inquire whether those intuitions will hold. If not, then I challenge you to come and take part in the task of taking metaphysics seriously again.

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