

# Criticism, Renewal and the Future of Metaphysics

*Peter Simons*

Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.

**Mao Zedong**

## *Metaphysics, What*

From the beginning of Western philosophy until the 18th century, the most important part of philosophy was metaphysics: other parts were subordinate to it. Aristotle, the editors of whose works gave us the name 'metaphysics', did not invent the subject, but he first clearly demarcated it, and signified its primacy over other parts of philosophy by the name he used, 'first philosophy'. Metaphysics was first in two ways. Firstly, metaphysics set out the most general principles applying equally to all things, such as the principle that a thing cannot be both in a certain way and not in that way at the same time. Secondly, it provided an outline inventory of the entities available when describing any subject of interest, whether it be the basic constituents of matter, the kinds of living organisms, the forms of political organisation, the things investigated by mathematicians or worshipped by the devout. The first of these tasks naturally brings metaphysics into contact with logic, which investigates the formal principles of inference and necessary truth. The second brings it into contact with the specialised disciplines which examine the detail of what there is. Throughout its long and chequered history, metaphysics has wavered between these two poles, now emphasising logic, now the constraints of empirical science.

## *Criticism of Metaphysics*

With the increasing complication of scientific knowledge in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the discovery that the world is not describable wholly in terms drawn from the experience and vocabulary of everyday life, it was perhaps inevitable that metaphysical claims should be subjected to criticism. Rationalist metaphysicians such as Spinoza and Leibniz claimed to know necessities about the world, but disagreed what these were, Spinoza holding there is but one substance, Leibniz holding there are infinitely many, and each claiming to prove his views from first principles. From Locke through Hume to Kant, more critical philosophers considered metaphysical knowledge claims should be subject to scrutiny as to their origins and reliability.

The upshot of this critical movement was to topple metaphysics from its pedestal. Metaphysical claims about the nature of reality were to be subject to the same sort of critical scrutiny as any scientific hypothesis, and it turned out that they were far more fallible than had been imagined. German idealism constituted a backlash against this criticism, but its heyday was short, and its unscientific claims stirred an even fiercer backlash against metaphysics, which came at different times in different European countries in the nineteenth century. For much of the nineteenth century, 'metaphysics' was a dirty word. Like the British empiricists before them, critics such as Comte in France and Mach in Austria proposed a more modest role for theoretical philosophy, that of protecting science from wild metaphysical speculation.

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In the early twentieth century, this anti-metaphysical movement joined with two growing philosophies driven by a Kantian emphasis on critical method. On the one hand, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology recommended abstaining from ontological commitments to uncertain 'transcendent' entities while knowledge claims were subject to scrutiny of the way in which they come up in our experience. By 'purifying' our claims of their existential weight, Husserl, imitating Descartes, promised to put science on a philosophically unshakable foundation. On the other hand, the logico-linguistic analysis created by Frege, Peirce, Peano and Russell in the service of the new mathematical logic were turned by Russell, Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle into tools for analysing and showing the limits of our knowledge by showing the limits to what we can meaningfully put into words. The Vienna Circle, following Mach, went further and declared that metaphysical claims were literally meaningless, being unsusceptible to the kind of scrutiny that a scientific claim should sustain.

### *Renewal*

Both of these anti-metaphysical programmes, that of phenomenology and that of logical positivism, collapsed under their own internal contradictions. Phenomenology postulated a primacy of subjective consciousness, transparently and infallibly describable, but was unable to sustain its claims because no Archimedean vantage point of pure description free of metaphysics was ever achieved. Logical positivism found its methodological strictures subject to its own negative criticism, and its unexamined metaphysical assumptions returned through the back door to undermine it.

To alert observers, these defects were obvious by mid-century. Later phenomenologists such as Ingarden and Merleau-Ponty abandoned Husserl's quest for a metaphysics-free foundation for science and accepted the best working hypothesis that there really is an external world with a plurality of things existing in it independently of human awareness. In analytic philosophy there were divergent reactions. Carnap, who had been most vociferous in rejecting metaphysics, became perfectly happy to posit numerous entities to play different semantic roles in his account of truth and meaning in the 1940s, while continuing to insist that no one such scheme gave the true inventory of reality. Carnap's relative indifference to the commitments of his semantic theory was later to be echoed by W. V. Quine. Quine criticised Carnap's sharp division between questions of meaning on the one hand and questions of fact on the other, proposing that we examine our best working theories and tease the metaphysics inherent in them out of an examination of the entities they quantify over when 'regimented' into the perspicuous medium of predicate logic. Quine's celebrated slogan 'To be is to be the value of a variable' drew attention again to the links between logic and ontology which had figured in the early analysis of Russell and Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein himself had long abandoned any hope of a perspicuous correspondence between a neat logical language and a neat logical world, and his painstaking but unsystematised later philosophy examining the details of ordinary usage carried no general metaphysical message. Similar scrutiny of ordinary language was pushed forward by several philosophers in Oxford, notably Ryle, Austin and Strawson. Of these, Strawson introduced the term 'descriptive metaphysics' in the subtitle of his

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1959 book *Individuals*. Descriptive metaphysics strives in Kantian fashion to capture those immutable aspects of the common human conceptual scheme which we all must share. Like Quine, Strawson considered that our use of such a scheme inevitably involves belief in a world of independently existing things, notably material bodies and psychophysical persons, and their qualities and relations. Categories like those of Aristotle were restored through attention to our daily linguistic practices, much indeed as Aristotle had himself found them, but tempered with a Kantian underpinning to forestall future criticism. Quine in the meantime had concluded that the fit between language and the world, mediated through our experience and linguistic behaviour, was sufficiently loose and multiply interpretable to make it impossible for us to draw definite metaphysical conclusions from any theory.

This ontological relativity sent Quine's views essentially back to those of Mach, where the role of everyday beliefs, and of science with its diverse theoretical posits was simply to make the most economical overall sense of our experience.

Both Quine and Strawson helped to revive metaphysics after the low point of positivism, but their ways with metaphysics should by rights have stopped the subject dead in its tracks once more: Quine's because ontology melted away again, Strawson's because nothing essentially new was left over to be done once the main points of descriptive metaphysics had been made. On the contrary, metaphysics has since the 1960s continued to grow in strength and confidence as a philosophical discipline. Hardly a month goes by without a new textbook or reader coming on the market, and metaphysical controversies resound through the professional journals with the liveliness of debate found in ancient Athens or medieval Europe. Why is this, and where will metaphysics go from here?

### *A Hundred Flowers*

Up until about 1960 metaphysics had to overcome the methodological strictures of its phenomenological and logico-linguistic critics, and it did so by using the tools of its opponents, whether the search for a phenomenological basis, or for an adequate account of meaning and logic. Perhaps the ultimate version of the view that metaphysics and ontology are subordinate to considerations of language and meaning was the move by Michael Dummett to transpose questions about the mind-independent existence (realism) or otherwise (antirealism) of objects of a disputed kind, into questions about the acceptability of the certain logical principles in the relevant area of discourse. The *realist* about such disputed entities as mathematical objects, or future events, or dispositional properties will be happy to accept that sentences about them may be true or false irrespective of our ability to actually decide the truth-value, whereas an *anti-realist* would confine the sentences accepted or rejected to those we could verify or falsify, and leave other sentences without truth-value.

Dummett's subordination of metaphysical considerations to logico-linguistic ones maintains the contact between metaphysics, semantics and epistemology that characterises Strawson's and Quine's metaphysics in their different ways, but most subsequent metaphysical debate has been less subordinate to linguistic considerations. A milestone in this change was the revival of discussion of the venerable problem of universals by David Armstrong in 1974. Armstrong considered that the meaning of

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general terms has no relevance to the metaphysical question whether universals exist, and he preferred to rely on direct arguments. General terms might be meaningful whether or not there are universals, and the question as to which universals exist was to be settled by science rather than in the linguistic philosopher's armchair.

Metaphysics lives in contact with the special sciences, and they raise problems which leak outside their own boundaries and reveal a metaphysical side. Phenomenology grew out of Brentano's philosophical psychology, whereas analytic philosophy grew out of Frege's and Russell's attempts to provide a logical foundation for mathematics. After its establishment as a science in the nineteenth century, psychology went through its own methodological upheavals, rejecting the introspective methods of Wundt and Brentano in favour of behaviourism, a methodology embodying a deflationary philosophy of mind, influential in the middle analytic philosophy of Wittgenstein, Ryle and Quine.

The first sign that metaphysics was reviving outside the logic and language laboratory came with the robust metaphysical materialism of Place, Armstrong and Smart in Australia. Debates about the nature of the mental and its relation to the physical, given its edge by Descartes' dualism, had been muted under the anti-Cartesian influences of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and had been transposed into an issue of choice of scientific language by Carnap. Herbert Feigl's insistence that the mind-body problem is not a pseudo-problem but a genuine issue, together with the realisation that Ryle's dispositional analysis of mental acts would not work for the central cases of thinking and perceiving gave the Australian materialists their impetus. The Australian mind-brain identity theory, a metaphysical equation initially dismissed as naive by European sophisticates, led to a whole series of ever more varied and differentiated positions on the mind-body issue. At the same time the rise of computers and the prospect of genuine artificial intelligence, optimistically announced in 1950 by the computer pioneer Alan Turing, led to an increasing debate about the difference if any between human and (prospective) machine mentality, as well as the use of computer models such as the distinction between hardware and software to try and understand mind. The result was to put philosophy of mind at the centre of analytic philosophy, displacing logic and language from the central position it had occupied since the early twentieth century.

However, the strongest motivation for reviving metaphysics continued to come from considerations of logic and language. From the mid-century, logicians such as Arthur Prior in England, Georg Henrik von Wright in Finland and Saul Kripke in the USA developed modal logics, dealing with necessity, tense, belief, obligation and other subjects. The semantic analyses of modal logics, anticipated by Carnap, involved the Leibnizian idea of possible worlds. The mathematical success of such analyses convinced many that the use of logical semantics could complete for a wider range of vocabulary the rigorous analysis of language that Russell had begun, and replace the informal methods of ordinary language philosophy. Carnap's student Richard Montague extended this analysis to a wide range of features of natural language previously regarded as inaccessible to logical analysis. In the course of such analyses, logicians and linguists found themselves up to their ears in ontological commitments to times, worlds, and a host of abstract mathematical objects such as sets and functions, and in general were happy to do so.

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The metaphysical high-water mark of this development was the modal realism of David Lewis, who claimed in his 1987 book *The Plurality of Worlds* that alternative possible worlds exist and are just as real as our own. Lewis confronted those who greeted this metaphysical extravaganza with an 'incredulous stare' by challenging them to find an alternative account promising equal expressive power. That dispute continues unabated today.

Lewis's ontology for the semantics of modality forced others who rejected it to offer alternative semantic accounts with alternative ontologies. Those utilising only actually existing entities were called *actualist*.

Some actualist views employed states of affairs as substitutes for possible worlds, or took them to be the objective items making modal propositions true. Another name for states of affairs is *situations*, and they were made the ontological basis of a wide-ranging semantic account of natural language, going under the name of *situation semantics*. This view sidestepped the popular modeltheory-inspired semantics deriving from Tarski and Carnap in favour of an account in which the participants in a linguistic exchange are concretely embedded in the situations on which they comment and which serve to give their utterances meaning.

#### *Truthmakers*

The idea of a truthmaker, an entity which by existing makes a proposition or other truth-bearer true, goes back to Aristotle, but it flourished in the logical atomism of Russell and Wittgenstein, where the truthmakers were termed *facts*. One lively strand of contemporary metaphysics is based on the idea that some or all true propositions stand in need of a truthmaker. The Truthmaker Principle, that every true proposition has a truthmaker, was probably first formulated by C. B. Martin in the 1960s but emerged in print much later in the 1980s. A restricted Truthmaker Principle deriving from phenomenology as much as from logical atomism was proposed independently in 1984 by Mulligan, Smith and Simons, who identified individual accidents or *tropes* as a primary source of truthmakers. Unlike the correspondence theory of truth, which requires a suspiciously cosy one-to-one correspondence between truths and what makes them true, truthmaker theories allow that truths may have more than one truthmaker, for example a disjunction, both of whose disjuncts are true, has as truthmakers those for both disjuncts, although either would have sufficed alone.

Later truthmaker theories diverge over how rich and numerous they take truthmakers to be. Truthmaker *maximalism* requires at least one truthmaker for every truth, whereas John Bigelow's principle that *truth supervenes on being* requires only that there be some sufficient reason, resting ultimately on what there is and is not, for why a given proposition is true rather than false, but this does not always amount to a true proposition's having a truthmaker. The other respect in which truthmaker theories differ is in what entities they evoke as truthmakers. The most popular choice has been states of affairs, following the lead of Russell and Wittgenstein. Indeed David Armstrong, a leading truthmaker maximalist, contends that the world is composed ultimately of states of affairs, a view found also in situation semantics. Other truthmaker theories have looked for other entities to do the truthmaking role, either a single kind, such as tropes, or a mixture of kinds.

## *Trope Theory*

The term 'trope' is due to Donald C. Williams, an American philosopher whose work achieved its deserved prominence long after it was written in the mid-century. Williams, influenced in some measure by Husserl, proposed a single-category ontology of tropes. Tropes are individual instances of properties, such as individual rednesses or roundnesses, located where their particulars are, and different in differing particulars. A similar conception of properties as 'thin' or 'abstract' particulars was proposed earlier in the century both by Husserl and by G. F. Stout, but the idea goes back to Aristotle's *Categories* and was standard in the Middle Ages and early modern period. Tropes offer nominalists a way to rebut many of the criticisms of realists about universals, avoiding some of the difficulties of earlier and more radical forms of nominalism such as that of Nelson Goodman in the USA or Tadeusz Kotarbinski in Poland. In the hands of Williams and followers such as Keith Campbell and John Bacon, tropes are proposed as the sole ontological basis category, universals being considered as classes of tropes grouped by resemblance while substances are classes of tropes grouped by a link such as compresence in space and time.

## *Persistence, Time and Events*

An aside in David Lewis's *The Plurality of Worlds* claims that the only way to make sense of change is to suppose that objects that persist, or exist at different times, have temporal parts, as do events and processes. Such *occurrents* typically are extended in four dimensions: three of space and one of time. They thus *perdure*, that is, spread through time by having different phases, by contrast with substances such as Strawson's bodies and persons, which *endure*, that is, are present as a whole at each time at which they exist. Such *continuants* are typically three dimensional, being extended only in space. Lewis claimed that continuants cannot be said to have contrary properties at different times without either making properties relations to times, or indulging in *presentism*, the view that only the present is real, and past and future do not exist. He thus advocated a *four-dimensionalist* account of ordinary continuants, giving them distinct temporal parts to bear the contrary properties.

Lewis's argument and the responses to it brought it into connection with ongoing discussions of the dispensability or otherwise of the idea of real tense, that is, an ontological distinction between past, present and future, put forward under the name 'A-Series' as essential to time in John McTaggart's famous 1908 argument for the unreality of time. Tensors, or proponents of the A-Series, contrast with detensors, those who say time consists only of the B-Series, times connected by relations of earlier and later. Often tensors defend the three-dimensional account of change while detensors defend the four-dimensional account, though in fact the two oppositions are independent of one another. An unintended side effect of Lewis's criticism was to prompt several philosophers to defend the otherwise improbable doctrine of presentism.

Lewis's view of change echoes similar ones put forward by Russell, Whitehead, Carnap and others earlier in the 20th century, in response to the conceptual strains set up by Einstein's relativity theory. Whitehead's and Russell's view that the world is composed of events was a revisionary metaphysic which went into abeyance in the mid-century, to be revived by Lewis's arguments and somewhat earlier by semantic

arguments from Donald Davidson. Davidson contended that the best way to account for the logic of statements about action, such as the inference from *Sam sliced the salami in the bathroom at midnight* to *Sam sliced the salami*, was to follow a suggestion of Frank Ramsey's that such statements contain a tacit quantification over events: roughly speaking, There was an event whose agent was Sam, whose object was the salami, whose instrument was a knife, whose temporal location was midnight and whose spatial location was the bathroom.

Dropping one or more of the conjoined clauses and translating back into usual idiom would reveal the inferred sentence as an instance of conjunction elimination, not of some esoteric logic of adverbs. Davidson's analysis rapidly won converts to an ontology of events and has become the standard view among linguists. It coincided with a vigorous period of investigation into the ontology of action, and a range of divergent ontologies of events emerged, some like Davidson saying events were *sui generis* individuals, Quine holding with Russell that they were simply the contents of any portion of spacetime, others such as Jaegwon Kim saying they were property exemplifications, and yet others such as Roderick M. Chisholm saying they were states of affairs. This debate subsided without being resolved, the variety of theories being later enriched by the suggestion of Jonathan Bennett that events are tropes. Nevertheless, whereas in the mid-century events were much less respected than substances as primary entities in the metaphysical menagerie, now the boot is on the other foot: few metaphysicians question the existence of events, whereas the concept of substance is much less central than it was.

### *The Future of Metaphysics*

Metaphysics re-emerged reinvigorated in the twentieth century. Its debates lie at the centre of philosophy, as they did in ancient and medieval times. Metaphysical issues now permeate philosophical discussion of areas once considered to provide the scientific replacement for metaphysics, such as the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophy of physics. Computer scientists and intelligence artificers have borrowed the word 'ontology' to designate platform- and implementation-independent representations of objects in many domains of interest. Their use of the term touches the metaphysician's use only tangentially, but the task of providing computer-based representations for objects from all walks of life raises philosophical questions about the relative merits of alternative schemes for describing things, of the sort that linguists discussed in the 20th century. It is no accident that the large-scale CYC project of artificial intelligence led by Doug Lenat organises its data, intended to capture the commonsense knowledge that humans instinctively enjoy, around a systematic ontology.

Computer representation is bound to raise anew the kinds of question metaphysicians and philosophers of language have long pondered. In fact many of the more serious, rigorous and systematic attempts to investigate the natures of things from many domains now take place among computer scientists and cognitive scientists. Such attempts to represent the knowledge that human beings bring to bear on everyday situations and everyday language bid fair to reiterate positions and concerns of mid-century ordinary language philosophy, only this time with machines.

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By contrast, the kinds of metaphysical issue raised by the application of metaphysics to the sciences is likely, because science does not confine itself to the explication of common sense, to result in revisions of our conceptual scheme, of the sort envisaged by the revisionary metaphysicians of the early 20th century, like Bradley, McTaggart, Alexander and Whitehead. Metaphysics in the 21st century could go in one of two directions. It could retreat again to the modest, descriptive and conservative variety, metaphysics within the bounds of epistemology, proposed by Kant and seconded by Strawson. Or the metaphysical enterprise could boldly go into new areas of application, such as medicine, biology, chemistry, engineering, economics and management, where computer modelling requires more than commonsense knowledge representation.

Because of the increasing specialisation of all sciences, including philosophy, there is the risk that metaphysics too could become compartmentalised into disjoint areas with barely any communication between them. Philosophy tends to resist compartmentalising more than the special sciences, but social and market pressures apply to philosophers and promote specialisation at the expense of synoptic visions. Certainly the trend of much late 20th century philosophy has been to narrower specialisation. The sheer volume of knowledge makes it ever more unlikely that a future Leibniz or Hegel could synthesise knowledge into a single system.

Nevertheless, though philosophers make poor prophets, I beg to state how I *would like* metaphysics to develop over the next hundred years, even if I am unsure whether it will do so. My vision for future metaphysics is that it should be untrammelled by the need to conform to ordinary language or the restrictions of our everyday view of things. It should be bold and revisionary. It should abandon the reliance on mathematics and logic that has narrowed its vision in the twentieth century. It should treat the need to find place for a credible theory of linguistic meaning as a constraint rather than a method. It should draw on the wisdom of the great philosophers, and not pretend it is a kind of advanced science needing to refer to nothing more than five years old. It should reject *a priori* methods and certainty and be thoroughly fallibilistic, open to revision from within by argument and from without by scientific advance. It should encourage team effort and cooperation among metaphysicians and others, to counteract the pressures of specialism. It should be pluralistic, not because all the different views are somehow relatively right, but because, as Mao (all too briefly) recognised, the truth is more likely to emerge from the contention of competing theories than from the dictates of orthodoxy or fashion. It should be prepared to consider and engage in applications in areas hitherto considered remote from its concerns. It should aspire to be integrative and systematic, putting the various kinds of entity as putatively disclosed by all the special disciplines into a single overarching categorial scheme. If the late twentieth century was a heyday of analytic metaphysics, may that of the twenty-first be synthetic.

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### *Further Reading*

To reference all the philosophers mentioned in passing in this article would double its length. If anyone wishes chapter and verse for any allusion, they are welcome to e-

mail me at p.m.simons@leeds.ac.uk. Instead I will list some of the best books available for getting to grips with the lively modern metaphysical literature.

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