

Metaphysics: 5 Questions

Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (ed.)

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Name (to appear in publication):

Thomas Hofweber

Position (to appear in publication):

Associate Professor of Philosophy

Affiliation (to appear in publication):

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The 5 Questions

1. Why were you initially drawn to metaphysics (and what keeps you interested)?

Like so many others, I got into philosophy by accident, but once infected I was drawn to metaphysics by purpose. Metaphysics held the promise to find out what reality is *really* like. Although it seems beyond question that science tells us many important things about what reality is like, metaphysics promised to go further. Metaphysics promised to be able to accept the description of reality science, and possibly a good part of common sense, provides and to augment it with an even more revealing description of reality, one that says what the world is *really* like. Metaphysics seemed to be the ultimate and final step of inquiry. It could accept everything from the rest of inquiry, that there are electrons, people, stars, and still have the question left open for itself whether in the end everything is mental, or whether in the end there are no objects at all, or whether in the end there are no minds at all. I was curious to find out what, in the end, reality was really like.

I now think that all this is completely mistaken, but I didn't know that then, when I got interested in metaphysics as a student. It is thus most fair to follow up with what keeps me interested. First, even though metaphysics doesn't give us the ultimate and most revealing description of reality, it still has some real and important questions to answer. And these questions are very interesting, although maybe not as grand as I originally thought. I do think that some important questions about reality are properly addressed in metaphysics, although it is a substantial and difficult problem to say which questions these are. I will outline below my reasons for thinking that some questions in ontology are in the domain of metaphysics, and what I think the answer to these questions is. There are many questions that are traditionally thought to be metaphysical ones that are incredibly interesting, even though there is a real issue whether these questions are in the domain of philosophy. And that issue, which questions about reality are in the domain of metaphysics and philosophy, is also terribly fascinating. Why these questions are interesting is a bit hard to justify to those who don't share this sentiment. Some questions just stick to some people, others to other people.

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Besides the interesting questions that metaphysics hopes to address, metaphysics, and many other parts of philosophy as well, are also simply fascinating as a collective enterprise: it is not clear if the problems we deal with are incredibly important, totally irrelevant, or just outright confused. This can have the comforting effect that the most damage one can do with ones work is to confuse others, but it gives rise to the threat that the most good one can do with ones work is to confuse oneself. But besides the status of the problems, it is also not clear when someone has made progress on a problem. The profession is full of people, myself and most others included, who think they know the answer to one or more important problems, while hardly anyone else finds much to like about their answer, if they even listen to it. And the profession is full of people, myself again included, who think that the most influential people in their field are so confused in their philosophy it is a miracle they can still walk. It is hardly the case that the work that is considered the best by many people in the field is also considered to be correct by these same people. And with all this one would think that metaphysicians couldn't stand each other, but just the opposite is true.

And metaphysics is fascinating as a personal project. All of us spending our life's work writing for a couple of people that we know fully well won't actually be persuaded by what we have to say, while we also know that who is right probably doesn't make much difference outside of philosophy, and all the while we think that this is the greatest way to spend ones professional life. And it probably is, or at least its a close second.

2. What do you consider to be your most important contributions to metaphysics?

Some of the central problems in philosophy, and especially metaphysics, are closely related to problems in ontology. These include classic metaphysical problems like the problem of universals, and questions about the objectivity in a certain domain, for example the question whether the objectivity of mathematics is tied to the existence of mathematical entities. However, ontology as a philosophical project is puzzling all by itself. On the one hand it aims to answer deep questions about what the world is made from. And it tries to do this by trying to answer questions like

(1) Are there numbers?

or

(2) Are there properties?

But, on the other hand, it seems that questions like these have trivial answers. It is trivial to conclude that there are properties, being a cat is one, and being a dog is another. And it is trivial to conclude that there are numbers, for example it follows from the mathematical theorem that there are infinitely many prime numbers. And there are other trivial ways to conclude this as well, discussed below. But how come the apparently deep metaphysical questions whether or not reality contains properties, which we hoped to express with (2), can be answered so easily?

I have proposed a solution to this general puzzle about ontology which is based on facts about natural language. I have argued that quantifiers in natural language are polysemous, that is they have a number of

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different but related readings, which in turn is to say that they can make one of several different contributions to the truth conditions of a sentence in which they occur. So, sentences like

(3) Everything exists.

have at least two readings. On one it is true, and on the other it is false. On the true one one is saying that all the objects in the domain of quantification exist. On the false one it is required that a certain inferential role obtains. That is, (3) on that reading is true only if all instances of

(4) *t* exists.

are true, where “*t*” can be any term in our language. However, this is false, since

(5) Santa exists.

is false, and thus (3) does not have the proper inferential role on that reading. It can be seen quite easily, but I won't get into this, that neither reading is a restriction of the other reading. Why we have these different readings in natural language, and what they are more precisely is spelled out in Hofweber (2000), Hofweber (2005b), and Hofweber (2009b).

The polysemy of quantifiers implies a new way to think about the relationship between the truth of quantified statements and ontological questions. And it implies something about how ontological questions should be stated. The question can really simply be stated as (1) or (2). However, these sentences have two different readings, and only one of them expresses an ontological question. One of these readings does capture what we aim to ask when we ask the questions we put together in the discipline of ontology. But the other reading asks a question which is trivially answered in the affirmative.

This view of the function of quantifiers gives rise to a non-Carnapian version of Carnap's internal-external distinction. Carnap wanted to distinguish internal from external questions about what there is, and he argued that the internal ones are trivially answered in the affirmative (at least when they are of the general kind like (1) and (2)), while the external ones are meaningless, or at best construed not as factual, but as pragmatic. The external ones are the ones metaphysics aims to answer, but since they have to have a meaningful content the metaphysical project of ontology is misconceived, or so says Carnap in Carnap (1956). I agree with Carnap that we need to distinguish two kinds of questions that we can ask when we ask what there is. But contrary to Carnap I think both are equally meaningful and factual. And contrary to Carnap I argue that the difference can be understood simply as arising from different needs we have for quantifiers in ordinary everyday communication. And still contrary to Carnap I hold that this distinction does not lead to a rejection of metaphysics, but is a crucial part of showing that metaphysics at least sometimes is a legitimate discipline that can go side by side with the sciences (I will say more about this below).

These issues so far relate to ontological questions in general. But how does it help us with ontological questions in particular, questions like the problem of universals, or the ontological questions about numbers? My work on these problems has also focused on ordinary, everyday features of our talk about numbers and properties, and how it helps us shed light on the metaphysical problems. There are certain

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puzzles that arise from our ordinary talk about numbers and properties that are the key to understanding the metaphysical puzzles that numbers and properties are famous for.

Talk about properties and numbers is quite puzzling, in a number of different ways. First, number words in natural languages have a curious feature that they appear to be of two quite different syntactic categories: on the one hand they appear to be singular terms, or even names, as in

(6) The number of moons of Jupiter is four.

and on the other hand they appear to be like adjectives, as in

(7) Jupiter has four moons.

On top of all that (6) and (7) seem to be quite obviously equivalent. This is a puzzle about natural language only so far, just about what these numbers are doing in sentences like this, and that can be. In fact, there are several examples of the occurrence of number words in natural languages besides the above two, which were first pointed out by Frege in Frege (1884), that give rise to this puzzle. And some of these examples are very closely related to the occurrence of number words in arithmetic. I have argued in Hofweber (2005a) and Hofweber (2007) that number words are not referring expressions even when they occur as singular terms, as in (6), nor when they occur in their symbolic form in arithmetical equations. The reason why they occur as singular terms explains why the sentences seem so obviously equivalent. And the resulting view of what the content of arithmetical equations is gives rise to a largely logicist view in the philosophy of arithmetic. Arithmetical statements are true no matter what exists, nor how many things exist. I can't spell out here why that is so, but it is spelled out in detail in Hofweber (2005). The resulting view of arithmetic has arithmetic occupying a special place among all disciplines in mathematics. Even though it appears to be the case that arithmetical statements contain referring expressions, number words in fact are not referential expressions, even when they occur in arithmetical equations. And even though it seems that the literal truth of arithmetic requires the existence of numbers, it in fact requires the existence of no particular objects, nor of a particular number of objects. It is true no matter what, or how many, things exist.

I have looked at talk about properties and propositions, and argued that property nominalizations like “the property of being a dog” and that-clauses like “that Fido is a dog” are not referring expressions either. They do not have the function to pick out entities in natural language. In addition, quantification over properties and propositions in ordinary uses is based on the internal, inferential role, reading of the quantifiers. This gives rise to a view about the function of talk about properties and propositions that has numerous consequences for various large scale philosophical debates. It guarantees that we are capable to say, in our present language, everything there is to say about the world, and it explains how apparent differences in expressive power in different languages are to be understood. The details of all this are spelled out in my Hofweber (2006). This solves the problem of universals, or so I claim. It is true that

(8) There are many things we have in common, i.e. being human, etc.

But (8) is only true on the internal reading of the quantifier. The external reading of (8) is false. And thus even though there are many things we have in common, there is no further legitimate question what these

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things are, where they are located, whether they are fully present in every object that has them, and so. The latter project assumes that (8) is true on the external reading. But it is a consequence of the semantics of property nominalizations that (8) on the external reading is guaranteed to be false. Nothing is or could be the property of being a dog given that the phrase “the property of being a dog” does not even aim to refer to an object. Again, the arguments are spelled out in Hofweber (2006) and also Hofweber (2009a).

Besides the issues touched on above I have also done work in other traditional areas of metaphysics. I have argued in Hofweber (2009c) that the problem of change should play no role in the metaphysics of time and material objects, since there is no metaphysical problem about change. I have argued in Hofweber (2005c) that object dependent properties are not physical properties, since physics doesn't care which object is involved in a process, only what kind of object. I have concluded from this that object dependent properties do not supervene on physical properties and thus direct reference is incompatible with physicalism. I have also worked in the philosophy of mathematics, on the semantic paradoxes, the philosophy of logic, and on some other things that are not directly related to metaphysics.

3. What do you think is the proper role of metaphysics in relation to other areas of philosophy and other academic disciplines, including the natural sciences?

Metaphysics has often been under attack as a confused, illegitimate and misguided part of inquiry. Usually these attacks try to show that metaphysics tries to answer meaningless questions, or that metaphysics could not lead to knowledge. While I do not think there is all that much to these concerns, I do think that there is a serious worry about metaphysics along a different line: many traditional metaphysical questions can be seen as having been answered by other, more authoritative parts of inquiry, in particular the natural sciences, including mathematics. To consider the latter case, take the question whether there are numbers. It is intended by the philosopher who asks it to be a question about mathematics from the outside. If the answer is 'yes' then arithmetic is about a domain of objects that makes it true and objective. If the answer is 'no' then arithmetical truth and objectivity must have quite a different source. But this question doesn't seem to be what it is intended to be, i.e. a question asked about arithmetic from the outside. Instead it seems that it is answered within arithmetic itself. After all, arithmetic has shown that there are infinitely many prime numbers, and thus there are infinitely many numbers. So the question whether there are any numbers either can't be a metaphysical question at all, or at least it would seem that metaphysics is considering questions that are already answered in mathematics. Metaphysics can't hope to be more authoritative than mathematics about questions that mathematics addresses. Metaphysics has to find its place somewhere among all the other disciplines of inquiry. I think metaphysics has to meet two general constraints: first it has to be modest in that it can not hope to have the authority to override the answers given to certain questions in the sciences. Metaphysicians, as individuals, can join and contribute to the other parts of inquiry, but metaphysics can't claim to have greater authority than the sciences in areas where they overlap. Second, metaphysics has to be ambitious. That is it has to have some questions that are properly addressed by it. One way to be modest is just to hold that all questions are to be addressed by the sciences. But this would be unambitious, it would leave nothing for metaphysics to do. To be ambitious metaphysics has to hold that there are questions that are properly addressed by it. How metaphysics can be ambitious, yet modest, is the crucial question. I am not sure how much of metaphysics can be ambitious, yet modest, but I do not think that all metaphysics as it is carried out today can be ambitious, yet

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modest. I do think, however, that some parts of metaphysics can be ambitious, yet modest, in particular ontology.

One mistaken way to defend that metaphysics can be ambitious, yet modest, is to take it not to be concerned with questions as I have put them just now, but instead with questions like the ones discussed at the very beginning of my answers. This approach could go as follows: Metaphysics is not concerned with the question whether there are numbers. That is in the domain of mathematics. Metaphysics is rather concerned with the question whether there are *really* numbers. And more generally, this proposal goes, metaphysics is concerned with what is *really* the case. But what is the difference being there being numbers, and there *really* being numbers? In the past some philosophers have tried to make sense of such a distinction, trying to spell out what the difference comes down to, but these attempts either relied on some unexplained terms comparable to 'really', or just failed outright. Some contemporary philosophers have taken the failures to spell this difference out in understandable terms to heart, but instead of giving up on the distinction they instead propose to accept it as primitive, in particular as a metaphysical primitive. One version of this is Kit Fine's, for example, in his Fine (2000). Fine wants to distinguish what is true from what is true IN REALITY. Of course, here the difference is not intended to be between what is true in fiction and what is true in reality. What is true in the ordinary sense is generally what is true in reality, not just in fiction. Rather, the difference between what is true and what is true IN REALITY uses a primitive, distinctly metaphysical sense of reality, capitalized as REALITY. This notion is to be taken as a primitive of metaphysics, not necessarily to be spelled out in any other terms. And given such a notion metaphysics easily has a domain of questions that it aims to settle. Whereas the sciences might find out what is true, metaphysics tries to find out what is true IN REALITY. There are slightly different versions of this way to carve out a domain of metaphysics presented by various philosophers, using various metaphysical notions like PRIORITY, FUNDAMENTAL, METAPHYSICAL STRUCTURE, and, of course, *REALLY*.

But all this is a big mistake. The crucial mistake is that although it is perfectly fine to use primitive metaphysical terms in one's metaphysical theorizing, it is not fine to use primitive metaphysical terms in the questions that define the domain of metaphysics. To properly introduce primitive terms one first has to state a well defined question, stated in already accessible terms, and then propose an answer to that question, possibly in the form of a theory that contains primitive theoretical terms. But when the terms occur in the question itself then metaphysics turns into an esoteric discipline: one must understand primitive metaphysical terms in order to know what questions metaphysics is trying to answer. You have to be an insider to get in the door. (For more on this see Hofweber (2009a) and Hofweber (2009b)). Metaphysics, if it is a legitimate discipline at all, must find questions for itself that are accessible to all, and that can be expressed in ordinary terms. And at the same time these questions must not be in the domain of the sciences. The questions of metaphysics must have sufficient independence from other parts of inquiry, and they must be expressed in ordinary natural language. Whether and how this is to be done for many traditional metaphysical problems is itself a major problem. This is much more serious than many metaphysicians like to think.

On the view outlined above, and defended in the papers cited, one gets the result that some ontological questions, in particular the ones about numbers, properties and propositions, indeed simply can be asked with the question "are there numbers, etc.?" And this question, on its intended reading, is not answered in the sciences, and thus left for metaphysics to address. This gives ontology a distinct domain of questions it

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can address, in harmony with the questions that the sciences address. This meets the requirement for ontology to be ambitious, yet modest, metaphysics. But not all ontological questions fall in the domain of metaphysics. I think that the question whether there are any material objects, for example, does not fall in the domain of metaphysics. It is for the sciences to settle. Which questions fall in the domain of metaphysics and which ones fall in the domain of the sciences is a substantial and difficult question, and for most cases I have no answer to it.

Among other philosophical disciplines metaphysics has a special relationship to the philosophy of language and to the philosophy of science. The latter because it discusses what we should take science to have established, and what still is left to be done even on the questions that science clearly addresses. The former since issues about language are often crucial in getting clear what the metaphysical questions are, and what does and doesn't answer them. The work of mine outlined above is closely tied to issues about language, but not because metaphysical questions are about language, but because the study of language helps us get clearer what these questions are, and how we might hope to answer them.

4. What do you consider to be the proper method for metaphysics?

I do not think metaphysics has a distinct method. Metaphysics is a field that covers a number of different issues that are different in nature and often unrelated. The problem of freedom of the will and of the existence of mathematical objects are completely different problems, although both are grouped together as metaphysics. For each part of metaphysics one has to work out how to best address the problems, and one shouldn't think that different parts of metaphysics are more closely related than simply being put together for some reasons or for no reason in the same subfield of philosophy.

Some problems traditionally thought to be part of metaphysics are solved by the sciences, with empirical methods. I think this is true, for example, for the refutation of nihilism. We have sufficient reason to believe both that material objects exist at all and that they have parts on empirical grounds. These problems are not distinctly philosophical. Some traditional metaphysical issues can be resolved with empirical means. Some metaphysical problems can be resolved by reflecting on our concepts, others are largely a priori, but don't deal with conceptual truths. Some are partly empirical and partly not. Its a real mixed bag.

In metaphysics, just like everywhere else, one should start with what one already believes, and one should feel some entitlement to that. Then one should see if this is enough, coherent, explanatory, and so on, and revise it as the need arises. If one discovers that one could have started out some totally different way and would have been just as well off that way then one should take this seriously, but not panic. It is still OK to believe what one started out with, but maybe one should feel a little less confident in it. In general one should hold on to what one has unless one needs to give it up. Metaphysical reflection is, among other things, a way to see if one has to give good parts of ones prior beliefs up.

One way in which metaphysics deserves special attention is in the formulation of the questions it aims to answer. Here there is something distinct in the activity of metaphysics, although related issues arise in other parts of inquiry. Metaphysical questions are often driven by an intuition that there are two coherent ways the world might be in a certain respect. For example, time might either be just a further dimension,

just an add on to space, or something completely different. Here there seem to many to be two coherent alternatives to think about time that is given different labels in the debate (3D vs. 4D, presentism vs. eternalism), and it is then debated which one of them is true. But so far we do not have two coherent alternatives. For there to be two coherent alternatives there should be a question formulated in ordinary English such that those who hold onto one side of this debate say “yes”, and the others say “no”. However, it is incredibly hard to say what this question is, as is well known in this debate. But this issue affects many, if not most, metaphysical debates as well, and it has gotten a lot less attention there than in the philosophy of time.¹ To be clear on the question that we are trying to ask when we have an intuition that there are different ways the world might be in a metaphysical way is one thing that applies to metaphysics more than to other disciplines. For some debates I believe the differences are merely verbal, for some there are no two coherent alternatives, although we feel that there are, and for some the question can be stated in just a few words. Figuring out which debates fall into which group is the hard part.

5. What do you consider to be the most neglected topics in contemporary metaphysics, and what direction would you like metaphysics to take in the future?

Metaphysical theorizing is often concerned with arguing for or against a certain picture of what reality is like. But much theorizing is driven by pictures, metaphors, and suggestive suggestions. Sometimes these different pictures can't be cashed out: there are no two coherent positions that correspond to the metaphors. (I think this is true in the contemporary debate between endurance and perdurance understood as one about temporal parts, for example, see Hofweber and Velleman (2009).) Sometimes the different positions can be clearly articulated. That is to say, sometimes there is a question expressed in ordinary English so that those motivated by one metaphor or intuition answer it in the affirmative, and those who are drawn to a different picture answer it in the negative. For a whole range of philosophical problems it is not clear whether the different positions can be clearly articulated. This is widely accepted for the debate in the philosophy of time. But it is also true for many other problems. This is one issue that metaphysics must make progress on. I find this maybe more urgent than others since I think that some of the classic problems in metaphysics disappear once you try to be more clear what the problem is supposed to be. The problem of change is one example of this. (See Hofweber (2009c).) But I do not think this is true for metaphysics in general. I suspect that some problems are driven by different metaphors that in fact are not based on competing pictures of reality. Here the debate is misguided since the apparent conflict is really just one about which of two different but compatible metaphors should be seen as characterizing reality. But maybe more importantly, I suspect that some intuitions of a coherent position are correct, even though there is no coherent statement of that position. I suspect that this is true for idealism, in particular of a Kantian variety. I don't know of a coherent version of transcendental idealism, and I don't have one to offer. But I suspect that it is a coherent view that can be articulated. And once it is articulated it can be properly assessed. Stating the alternatives, and the questions, in ordinary terms is surprisingly neglected.

¹ One nice illustration of this general problem is due to Jonathan Bennett in Bennett (1963). He points out that since Descartes is a dualist and Spinoza a monist there should be a question such that Descartes answer it with “two” and Spinoza with “one”. It turns out to be harder to do this than one might think.

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Some philosophers have been motivated by problems just like these to turn to esoteric metaphysics: metaphysics that is defined by questions that contain primitive, unexplained metaphysical terms. Fine, in Fine (2000), does just that with the problem of articulating realism. But this way to state the problem is no way to move metaphysics forward. Esoteric metaphysics is just as appealing as what we could call *absurd metaphysics*. Absurd metaphysics tries to find out what is metaphysically the case. Here being metaphysically the case is a primitive metaphysical term that can't be explained in any other way. Furthermore, what is metaphysically the case and what is the case are independent of each other: neither implies the other. Metaphysics so construed has its own questions, but it is an absurd, and irrelevant, project. It can give its own description of metaphysical reality, i.e. of what is metaphysically the case, and this description is independent of the description of reality, i.e. what is the case. But there is no reason to think that the metaphysical description is more revealing than the other description, nor is there any reason to think that the metaphysical description is a description of anything. We have no reason to pursue this project. Some metaphysicians are attracted to versions of absurd metaphysics, and it is understandable why. It gives metaphysics its own questions, it gives the metaphysicians freedom from the rest of inquiry, it allows for lots of projects within metaphysics, and so on. But it nonetheless is an absurd project. There is the false promise of quickly and easily building a coherent metaphysical project on primitive metaphysical notions that appear in the questions that define the discipline. This promise has to be resisted. We need to spend the time and effort on trying to articulate the questions we hope to answer in ordinary terms, and to make sure that these questions aren't answered in other, more authoritative parts of inquiry. Once we have the questions, and we know that they are our questions, we have our project of metaphysics. This is the project we should hope for.

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