

Metaphysics as Mish Mash

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Until recently, Barnes and Noble had a distinct section of their bookstore categorized as "Metaphysics". When my mother found out about this, she was very pleased. After years of maternal worry over whether I was wasting my education and career, she could now boast that even the local bookstore valued work like mine! But after perusing the titles, her pride was quickly replaced with horror. *The Necronomicon? Do It Yourself Magick? No More Good Byes: Life Changing Insights from the Other Side?* She worried I was involved in an alternative lifestyle movement. Maybe even leading one.

Of course as a tenured, non-quack philosophy professor at a major research university, I hope it is apparent that I don't do *that kind* of metaphysics. But what exactly makes my research more respectable or grant-worthy than the crystallogists and necromancers whose work is sold at my local mall?

Here is a sample of metaphysics research questions currently starring in philosophical journals and premier conferences:

Do fundamental properties have fundamental properties?

What is a quantity?

Is it necessary that everything necessarily exist?

How many types of existence are there?

What makes these questions respectable or scholarly? And what exactly does a professional metaphysician give back to the world of scholarship?

Some philosophers—both contemporary and historical—have been tempted to answer that there is *nothing* that distinguishes the crystal nuts from the metaphysics professors. In the early 20th century, during the heyday of positivism, "metaphysics" was a pejorative reserved for philosophical theories that were meaningless. Others have granted that the views espoused by metaphysicians have content, you'd just have to be insane to take any of them seriously. Hence Thomas Reid's take on the subject: "A remarkable deviation from (good sense), arising from a disorder in the constitution, is what we call lunacy; as when a man believes he is made of glass. When a man suffers himself to be reasoned out of the principles of common sense by metaphysical arguments, we may call this metaphysical lunacy; which differs from other species of distemper in this, that it is not continued, but intermittent: it is apt to seize the patient in solitary and speculative moments; but

when he enters into society, Common Sense recovers her authority.” For Reid, metaphysicians traffic views of the world so bizarre as to require therapy. It shouldn’t be encouraged.

How should we metaphysicians defend ourselves against such criticisms? One option is to try to provide a positive characterization of metaphysics as a well-governed, unified field of inquiry. Call this the *methodological defense*. It’s a play we might borrow from economists, who often appeal to methodological virtues when their field comes under attack. In a 2013 [Op-Ed in the New York Times](#), famed Harvard (now Stanford) economist Raj Chetty argued that even though economists frequently disagree and have a less-than-stellar track record at forecasting economic events, it is still a proper science because of its commitment to testing hypotheses experimentally. Shared, sound methodology separates the science from the pseudoscience. That’s why economics deserves a category in the Nobel prizes.

The trouble is, when we look at the best work in metaphysics, there is nothing distinctive about excellent metaphysics research beyond the standard commitments of doing philosophy well: formulate rigorous arguments in well-recognized logical systems, follow those arguments where they lead, reject premises when the evidence tells against them. And the evidence can come from any source. Metaphysicians working on time will inevitably need to look at the empirical work supporting special and general relativity. Metaphysicians working on modality will gather evidence much the way a mathematician does, building and testing axiomatic systems and proving theorems in those systems. Metaphysicians working on social ontology increasingly look at evidence from the social sciences and psychology to build theories about what constitutes a group, a race, or a sexual orientation. The general methodology described above is perfectly sound, but it isn’t *distinctive* of metaphysics. Indeed, metaphysics is probably only distinctive in that it looks for evidence absolutely everywhere.

Maybe instead of looking for a distinctive methodology, we can unify metaphysics by some common subject matter. Call this the *topical defense*. Ted Sider advocates a topical defense. He insists that metaphysics is united in that studies reality’s fundamental structure. In *Writing the Book of the World* he contends: “In their loftiest moments, metaphysicians think of themselves as engaged in profoundly important and foundational intellectual enterprise. But if fundamentality is highly disjunctive, the field of metaphysics itself—which is delineated by its focus on fundamental questions—would be an arbitrarily demarcated one.” Other metaphysicians think the field is concerned with what facts serve as the ground for every other fact. Historically others have defined metaphysics as the study of being as such.

But I think the topical defense is too restrictive. This approach doesn’t make sense of all of the good research produced now and historically that has been gathered under the label metaphysics. Metaphysics is a historical mish-mash of topics. The name “metaphysics” comes from a title of a collection of Aristotle’s works on “the

unchanging”, the topic he took up after tackling the changing world in *The Physics*. Sure, in the old days, metaphysics was the subject in philosophy that dealt with the nature of being, the aspects of reality that do not change, and the first causes. Medieval followers of Aristotle added the study of properties and categories of being to the purview. Then in the Enlightenment era, physics became a discipline quite distinct from philosophy, and some topics that tended to be classified as “physics” topics were annexed by the metaphysicians—the nature of possibility, the nature of time and change, causation and freedom, the mind-body distinction... What do these questions all have in common? They are hard to answer. They require rigorous thought. Answering questions in one category sometimes require answering questions in another. But they just don’t bear any tight family resemblance. And we are far beyond what Aristotle covered in his original *Metaphysics*. I wrote my dissertation on the nature of changing objects. If we look to history as a guide to what the subject matter of metaphysics is, then I am anything but a metaphysician. But this is absurd. It’s the first line in the AOS portion of my CV...

The best work in metaphysics isn’t great because it has some distinctive topic or methodology. Rather it is great because it takes one of these interesting topics included in this vast historical mish-mash, points out an inconsistency in some otherwise good-looking beliefs we have about the topic, then tries to resolve the inconsistency while damaging as little as it can of our common sense and cherished beliefs. Sometimes the cure is almost as bad as the problem, as Descartes and many of the other more extreme metaphysicians of history have discovered. Faced with the Problem of the Many, your least costly bet might be recovering consistency in your views by denying that composite objects exist. That’s not crazy; it’s following the arguments where they lead. Any kind of rigorous thought followed to its conclusion will from time-to-time demand we change our worldview.

So what separates the professional metaphysicians from the quacks? The questions we ask should (in the good cases) be ones that matter. And we don’t always answer those questions with experiments. But any serious scholar should acknowledge that not every question that is well-formed and matters can be answered with empirical observation.

We ask “big” questions. Is there a god? Can a person endure the devastating effects of Alzheimer’s disease and still be the same person? What would it mean for two theories of quantum mechanics to be equivalent accounts of reality? Is pure mathematics a science? These are questions that contemporary metaphysicians tackle, and like any area of inquiry, sussing out the answers sometimes requires painstaking work on less sexy research questions. What logical systems can we use to reason about existence? What’s the relationship between properties and numerical identity over time? What’s prior—the structure or the elements of the structure? This explains why our work seems to outsiders a bit hard to understand. But every mature field gets to a stage where non-experts must work to understand the cutting edge.

And unlike the quacks, academic metaphysics has a cutting edge. Questions like: What crystals should I use to heal my arthritis? How do I communicate with the spirits of my relatives? We are rightly skeptical of whether these are well-formulated or important questions in the first place. They certainly don't lend themselves to longstanding and productive research programs, characterized by rigorous logical argument and periodic paradigm shifts.

Nobody should be embarrassed by pursuing the kinds of questions that characterize metaphysics, and the fact that our work is continuous with a long, rigorous and complicated historical tradition of inquiry is a reason to be doubly proud of the field. But we should avoid efforts to force some artificial unity on the discipline, like Ataturk forcing his countrymen to shave their beards. Metaphysics is better for its scope and diversity, even if the disjoint nature of the field means we are sometimes confused with eccentric new-age types.