

Book Review

Metametaphysics. New Essays on  
the Foundations of Ontology\*  
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Every discipline has its own instruments and studying them is part of the discipline itself. In order to draw true conclusions, for instance, an astronomer should know the extent to which the lenses of a telescope magnify. Likewise, a good metaphysician should know which are her working tools and how they can be used. Famously, by means of a study of metaphysical instruments, Carnap<sup>1</sup> reached an antimetaphysical stance. According to him, modern logic made it possible to analyse the main metaphysical instrument, i.e. language, with the result that metaphysical questions were dissolved: some questions – like *Does the nothing nothing?* – were discovered to be ill-formed and so incapable of being answered, others – like *Are there numbers?* – were analysable as questions not about metaphysical objects, but about language itself – along the lines of *Do we want to introduce number-words in our language?*

Following Carnap, many analytic philosophers developed a robust antimetaphysical attitude. Then something happened. Thanks to the works by Kripke, Lewis, Fine, van Inwagen, Armstrong and many others, metaphysics entered a new flourishing era. Metaphysical instruments were still analysed in order to obtain positive metaphysical results – consider, just to mention one example, Kripke's insight that proper names, qua instruments of rigid designation and direct reference, are appropriate tools for speaking about metaphysical necessity and possibility – but the antimetaphysical stance was

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<sup>1</sup> See (Carnap, 1937, Carnap, 1956 and Carnap, 1959).

set aside. Today it is certainly anachronistic to dismiss metaphysics as anachronistic<sup>2</sup>.

The book *Metametaphysics* is a collection of seventeen essays where some of the most outstanding contemporary metaphysicians debate issues not within metaphysics but about its tools. (i) Some discussions concern specific instruments employed in metaphysics. (ii) Others are more general and what is assessed is the very possibility of metaphysics.

(i) In the book a number of rather different topics are investigated: *existence, naturalness, possible worlds, analysis, abstraction, definition, simplicity, common sense, fundamentality, primitiveness*. In order to give a sense of how the discussion proceeds, I will focus on the notion of *existence*. When we say that numbers and chairs exist are we employing a unique notion of existence or different notions for different kinds of objects? What is the relationship between *existence* as employed in ordinary language and the existential quantifier? Is there only one existential quantifier or a variety of them? These questions are classical within analytic philosophy, and some historical references are made to works in this area by Quine, Ryle, Meinong, Putnam and even Heidegger. But some proposals, Fine's and Sider's, seem especially innovative. Fine rejects the Quinean thesis, so dominant in contemporary metaphysics, that sentences like *There are numbers* should be analysed as  $\exists x (x \text{ is a number})$ . He advances arguments purporting to show that this kind of analysis yields wrong results and renders existence questions too easily answerable for them to be the central task of metaphysics. Fine therefore suggests we also reject the standard Quinean view according to which *existence* should be analysed via an existential quantifier. According to Fine, *There are numbers* should be analysed as  $\forall x (x \text{ is a number}) \rightarrow (x \text{ is real})$ . Are numbers real? To answer difficult questions like this is the proper task of metaphysics, the study of the structure of reality. Sider, instead, accepts the Quinean claim that sentences like *There are numbers* should be analysed via the existential quantifier. Confronted with the possibility of a plurality of existential quantifiers, Sider maintains that, even if there were quantifier variance, there would still be a privileged quantifier in metaphysics, one which

<sup>2</sup> See (Williamson, 2007, p. 19).

is more natural, insofar as it is the only one that carves reality at the joints. Sider appeals to the notion of *naturalness*, a notion abundantly used in contemporary metaphysics. But while naturalness is usually applied to properties, in the wake of Lewis's division of properties into natural and not, Sider makes the original move of applying that notion to linguistic terms and their meanings.

The authors in the book focus, following Carnap, on linguistic instruments. But contemporary metaphysicians employ also other kinds of tools (*thought-experiments, intuition, even empirical experiments*) and it is arguably because they use those kinds of tools that metaphysics is now so flourishing. Some metametaphysical questions that naturally arise seem therefore to be worth investigating: Are thought-experiments reliable? May philosophy be experimental? Are we allowed or obliged to trust our intuitions? None of these questions are raised in the book and no reference is made to another recent work in metametaphysics, Tim Williamson's *The philosophy of philosophy*, or to the contemporary debates concerning experimental philosophy, where the focus is precisely on those topics.

Moreover, something seems to be missing also in the analysis of language. After Carnap, many notions have emerged that clearly bear on metametaphysics. For example, the notion of *inscrutability of reference* and the *principle of charity* seem to be central to any understanding of what a metaphysical debate is. When we debate with a metaphysician about the persistence, through time, of a rabbit, are we speaking about a rabbit or a rabbit-temporal-part? How should we interpret him and why so? In the book these topics are assumed without discussion or clarification.

(ii) Most discussions in the book consist in a general scrutiny of metaphysical tools with the aim in view of assessing the very possibility of metaphysics: given that metaphysics uses the tools it does, is scepticism about metaphysics anachronistic or is still a live option? Three are the kinds of scepticism advanced and criticised: Chalmers, Yablo and Thommason (criticised by Sider) advance the claim that at least some metaphysical sentences lack truth value; Hirsch (criticised by Bennett, Eklund, Hawthorne and Sider), suggests that some metaphysical debates are merely verbal disputes; Bennett maintains that we cannot in principle have evidence enough to establish the truth value of some metaphysical sentences. The sceptical proposals are analysed from the perspective of understanding what a

metaphysical debate is really about: are we discovering truths about reality or just deciding how to use our words? Are we making theoretical assertions or just suggesting proposals?

Not surprisingly, constant reference is made to Carnap. Price's and Soames's contributions are more historical in character and are devoted to understanding Quine's criticism of Carnap. They both conclude that the criticism does not really undermine Carnap's scepticism, which still is, therefore, a viable option.

What is surprising is that no substantive reference is made to the Carnap of *The logical syntax of language*, where he presented at length his metametaphysics. On discussing what is the appropriate language for philosophy, Carnap suggested that all languages are equally acceptable. A language L which introduces abstract entities is on a par with another, M, which does not. The debate about abstract entities turns out to be, therefore, a debate about what language to prefer. If, for instance, we want to express some laws of physics, we should choose L rather than M, not because L expresses correctly something about reality, but just because L is more useful than M, given our purpose. As Price points out in the book, Carnap is not Lewis<sup>3</sup>, who argued that since modal realism is *useful* we have very good reasons to take it as *true*. Lewis employed a tool common in contemporary metaphysics, another of the tools not discussed in the book, the *inference to the best explanation*. According to Lewis, since realism about possible worlds permits better explanations in philosophy than any other hypothesis concerning possible worlds, we have good reasons to take it as *true*. Carnap took even the thesis that metaphysical disputes are disputes about which language to adopt not as *true* or *correct*, but just as a *useful* proposal. He dissolved the level of truth and correctness. For him there was no room for any inference to the best explanation and therefore it seems incorrect to ask Carnap for arguments in support of the *truth* of his proposal<sup>4</sup>.

The sceptical positions presented in the book lack this crucial aspect of the Carnapian metametaphysics: they are advanced as theses, not as proposals. Therefore the reader is entitled to look for arguments in support of their truth or falsity. For admission of the very authors, the positions are only partially

<sup>3</sup> See (Lewis, 1986, pp. vii; 3-4).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. 'Lectures on Carnap' (Quine, 1990), Lecture III: "Carnap's thesis is to be regarded not as a metaphysical conclusion, but as a syntactic decision".

supported by weak arguments. This brings out the programmatic character of the book: having shown that scepticism in metaphysics is not anachronistic and that so many are the notions to be investigated, the book also shows that much in this area still needs to be done.

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