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Book Review
Metametaphysics, edited by David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman

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Disputatio Vol. 3, No. 28

May 2010

DOI: 10.2478/disp-2010-0006

ISSN: 0873-626X

Metametaphysics, edited by David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman. Oxford University Press, 2009, 544 pp.

If there were anything negative to be said about this book with any plausibility, it would be that it comes behind time. After a period of general rejection of all metaphysics and ontology in early analytic philosophy, over the past four or five decades we have witnessed a radical resurrection of all kinds of metaphysical investigation. Old questions, theses and arguments are renewed nowadays with some additional analytical sophistication. Now, the urgent question that has been overlooked in this metaphysical flood is: are all questions of ontology and metaphysics really sound? Is there absolutely nothing of the positivist position against metaphysics and its 'external questions' (as Carnap put it) that should be taken into account in contemporary investigations? When we simply neglect this central question, the alleged philosophical progress — the supposed 'overcoming of the naïve anti-metaphysical attitude' — can collapse into being merely a change of fashions. *Metametaphysics* is a volume that congregates some of the most productive (meta-)metaphysicians of our days to examine this question.

The book is composed of 17 contributions, some more historically oriented, others more systematically so. Positions vary according to the degree of more or less legitimacy the respective author concedes to metaphysical questions. Those who concede none or only less legitimacy are called 'ontological anti-realists' (not to be confused with 'anti-Platonists'), 'deflationists,' 'dismissivists' or, with some irony by Hawthorne, 'superficialists.' In all of them, the ghost of neopositivism is somehow revived. Those who defend the legitimacy and substantiality of metaphysical enquiry are called, in contrast, 'ontological realists,' 'anti-deflationists' or 'substantialists.' Some intermediate nuances are also discussed in the book: 'strong deflationism,' 'ultra-strong deflationism,' 'weak deflationism,' etc. Unfortunately, the contributions are not systematically grouped, but simply organized in a more profane alphabetic order. In any case, in the introduction to the book David Manley — one of the editors — gives a very good overview not only of the content of the book, but also of the whole contemporary discussion on the methodology of metaphysics and the most usual arguments of its critics. Incidentally, the very last paper, written by Stephen Yablo, is also a good place to begin reading the book. Yablo creates a conversation between three fiction-

al figures: a Platonist, a nominalist and an ontological-deflationist. Actually, this fictional conversation entails, in a certainly caricatural form, some of the main theses and arguments of the book.

Hirsch, Bennett, Eklund, Hale & Wright, Thomasson and Chalmers are members of the deflationary camp. Eli Hirsch, one of the most prominent defenders of deflationism, argues in his paper in favor of its semantic variant, i.e. 'semanticism.' According to him, many ontological disputes are merely verbal and lack any real substance. A dispute is merely verbal when, given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party agrees that the other party speaks the truth in its own language. The qualification 'many' is important in order to avoid radical deflationism: at least the Platonism versus nominalism dispute is considered substantial. Despite his evident proximity to Carnap, Hirsch stresses three points of disagreement: (1) he is not a verificationist, but a realist; (2) he does not appeal to the notion of 'external questions'; and finally (3) he tries to defend common sense. The main example of a merely verbal dispute is the case concerning endurantists and perdurantists. His argument in this case study is basically this: we could simply imagine a situation where an endurantist adopts a secret 'perdurantist language' (a language where he utters sincerely a sentence that 'sounds' true for a perdurantist, but untrue for an endurantist). In this case, the endurantist is simply changing his language without any change of inner convictions. All that he needs is a rule for mutual translation, in this case something like 'a is F at t' ↔ 'a has at t a temporal part that is F.' According to Hirsch, a similar change of language in not possible in a case of substantial dispute: a Jew cannot adopt a secret 'Christian language' in order to avoid persecution for uttering his religious convictions. Therefore, his case against ontology is not trivial, but characteristic of ontological pseudo-questions. Amie Thomasson defends a similar position in 'Answerable and Unanswerable Questions.' Following some insights of her earlier writings, Thomasson argues that when a reference question is not clarified, some ontological questions (e.g. concerning persistence and modal features) remain unanswerable. For disambiguating references (and so ontology) she suggests the rules of specification of 'frame-level application conditions' and 'coapplication conditions.' In general, competent speakers can follow rules to identify and re-identify an object even when they are unable to make them explicit. Now, several terms are vague for some identity and persistence conditions, and — that is her point against metaphysics — metaphysics cannot make genuine discoveries

beyond conceptual analysis. The real questions concerning identity and persistence belong to science, not metaphysics. She argues that the metaphysical disputes about existence only make sense when 'thing' is used in a neutral sense (not as a sortal) — but in these cases the existence question is unanswerable (because we lack identity and persistence conditions). Curiously, although she intends to dissolve ontological questions, her argument tends to show that mereological nihilists are wrong (probably as result of her sympathy for natural language). At the end, she generously avoids proposing the end of metaphysics, but the replacement of the usual ambitious metaphysical practices with descriptive metaphysics to make the identity and persistence condition of our terms explicit, and even suggests some revisionary work by proposing ways of revising some usual conditions.

Karen Bennett follows a different deflationist strategy in her contribution. Instead of dissolving ontological questions in language, she dissolves them in epistemology. Her position is a combination of ontological realism (ontological assertions are true or false, i.e. they do not lack truth-values) with 'epistemicism' (we have no justification to believe in the truth or falsehood of metaphysical assertions). Now, the main focus of her paper is not an argument against substantialism, but against the semantical 'Hirsch-styled' form of deflationism. She analyses two ontological disputes: 'one-thingers' versus 'multi-thingers' ('are the statue and the lump of clay one object, or two?') and mereological nihilists versus mereological universalists (is there a table, or only simples arranged tablewise?). In each of these disputes, there is a high-ontology participant, that tries to downplay his excessive ontology by linking exceeding entities to basic entities, and a low-ontology participant that tries to up-play his poor ontology. Both sides, therefore, use 'difference minimization' as a common strategy. But, and this is her main argument against semanticism, this 'difference minimization' cannot be achieved merely by linguistic tools. She shows in some detail that there is no suitable mutual translation between high-ontologist and low-ontologist languages, as semanticism supposes. I think her analysis is actually transparent and convincing. Unfortunately, the positive arguments for the epistemicistic claim (that we have no justification to believe in metaphysical assertions) are only superficially sketched at the end of the paper.

David Chalmers begins his long paper, similarly to Manley and Bennett, by offering an overview of the many positions in metametaphysics (anti-realism, light-weight realism and heavyweight

realism). He starts with Carnap's distinction between internal and external ontological questions, but substitutes it by his (somehow similar) distinction between ordinary and ontological existence questions in order to investigate what their main disagreements are. This builds the basis for the somewhat surprising claim that ontological realism is compatible with views about ontology that are nevertheless deflationary. After some criticism of each position, Chalmers offers his more original contribution to the debate, namely a defense of anti-realism. Although logic gives a semantic for existential quantifier, this semantic is only well determined in relation to a model, but ontological existence assertions have to be evaluated in the world — and 'worlds are not models.' Worlds do not have built-in domains. Ordinary existence assertions have clear truth-conditions only because they are associated with a domain. Such a domain is determined by a 'furnishing function,' relative to the context of utterance. Thus, in some cases, defective existence assertions can get clear truth-conditions through the application of furnishing functions. There are many different functions that determine different domains. The decisive point becomes the evaluation of the admissibility of such functions. For example, for the strong-realist consistency is the only constraint on admissibility, for the ultra-strong realist (someone like Meinong) there are no constraints on admissibility. After presenting his framework, Chalmes provides a potpourri of objections and replies. Of course, at the end we feel that some clarity is achieved concerning the disagreement of realism and anti-realism, but that a procedure for deciding the ontological question has only been shifted away.

Hale & Wright diverge a little bit from the main course of the book insofar as that they focus on a very specific question of metaontology, namely on abstractionism, i.e. the commitment to abstract entities derived from the application of the Fregean principle of abstraction. They analyze two leading proposals by some contemporary metaphysicians for providing a metaontology for abstractionsim: quantifier-variance and maximalism. Against the first, they argue that 'quantifier variance' is an obscure notion: are the different quantifiers really quantifiers (when 'yes,' what is their common core?) and really different (in what sense different, when not simply over different domains?)? Probably few proponents of quantifier variance would be impressed by this argument, since they may reject that there must be something like the 'common core' of quantifiers, just like different

games (to remember the old-fashioned example) do not have a common core. Against maximalism (the thesis that whatever possibly exists, really does exist), Hale and Wright show very convincingly why abstractionism is not committed to maximalism. Abstractionism is only committed to the priority thesis, i.e. the priority of truth and logical form over reference of sub-sentential expressions: when true sentences have singular terms, these must refer to some entity. They conclude by showing that abstractionism is neutral concerning the adoption of abundant or sparse conceptions of properties.

Different from these clear systematic papers, Eklund, Price, Soames and McDaniel offer exegetical — partially opinionated — papers; the first three deal with the Carnap-Quine controversy on the status of ontological questions, while McDaniel tries to extract from Heidegger's *Being and Time* some meta-ontological insights, in particular the idea that there are many ways in which things exist. McDaniel traces some parallels from this to the notion of quantifier variance. At the end, he derives from this some consequences for the contemporary Platonism vs. nominalism and actualism vs. possibilism debates. One very relevant point concerning these historical works (also implicit in the other more systematic papers) is a correction concerning the overestimation of Quine's relevance for the contemporary revival of metaphysics (Putnam is probably the most influent misinterpretator of Quine's relevance for ontology). In fact, Quine argues against Carnap's case against repudiation of ontological investigation, but he was by no way a friend of traditional metaphysics. This becomes especially clear in the paper with the funny title 'Metaphysics after Carnap: The Ghost Who Walks?' by Huw Price. He shows that Quine's criticisms of Carnap are often considered a defense of metaphysics, but this is clearly not the case. When the Carnapian analytic-synthetic distinction fails, then all questions (not only external, but also internal) become pragmatic — and this is not a good guide for metaphysics. Also the rejection of Carnap's pluralism does not lead us back to traditional metaphysics. This is well exemplified in Price's analysis of two alleged methodological contributions Quine made to ontology: the indispensability argument and the argument for modal realism by Lewis. A similar analysis is offered by Scott Soames. In his paper, he focuses on the Carnap-Quine debate concerning ontological commitment to abstract entities and its relation to the analytic synthetic distinction. Quine accused Carnap of being a Platonist, because he accepted abstract objects. Carnap him-

self considered his acceptance of a language with terms and quantification over abstracta in a metaphysical neutral way. By introducing words we are not accepting entities, but just stipulating meanings for pragmatic reasons. Quine's attack on analyticity was aimed to reject this self-attributed ontological innocence. At the end of his paper, Soames argues against Quine's conclusion that when we can eliminate quantification over numbers in science, we should conclude that they do not exist. The mere fact that they are helpful is a good argument for their acceptance. Finally, Eklund put Quine aside and focused his analysis on Carnap's view on ontology. After describing his interpretation of the importance of the external-internal distinction, he proposes pluralism as the better and more general characterization of Carnap's position. Pluralists defend that different languages with different notions of existence can describe the world equally well. This is not a kind of semanticism (like Hirsch's position). Eklund also presents some serious arguments against pluralism and an alternative route for making sense of some pluralist's insights.

Hawthorne and Sider offer the most direct reactions against ontological deflationism. John Hawthorne's defense against 'superficialism in ontology' (this is his label for ontological deflationism) is a direct criticism to Hirsch's semanticism. He begins with the probably too caricatural claim that superficialists tend to be verificationists and stresses that there are clear substantive questions that are not 'verifiable' in science too. His stronger argument against deflationism consists in showing a certain asymmetry between some ontological positions that a simple Hirsch-styled language change cannot dissolve. More precisely, some ontologies multiply possibilities in ways that are resisted by other ontologies. There is a kind of intensional advance of some ontologies in relation to others. E.g. the ontology of multi-thingers (in Bennett's terminology) cannot be adequately translated into the 'intensionally coarse grained' language of the one-thingers. The insensitiveness of semanticism is even more evident in the cases of hyperintensional contexts that are, according to Hawthorne, so frequent in metaphysics. Ted Sider builds his defense of ontological realism on an analysis of the notion of existence and quantification. Like many others in the book, he takes the dispute between mereological nihilism and universalism as paradigmatic, and show that 'quantifier variance' is by no means the better strategy for approaching the question. As Sider accurately says at the end, the problem we face here is how to draw a line between objective struc-

ture and conceptual projection, and even the deflationists must face this question (and his deflationist answer is just one among many ways of drawing the line). Interestingly, although Sider makes many important distinctions and offers a sophisticated logical analysis of quantification, his paper reveals a certain helplessness common to all ontological realists: when they leave the domain of logical analysis and turn to genuine philosophical questions, they appeal unavoidably to some weakly grounded theoretical notions, most of the time simply metaphors, in order to sustain their realistic view. In general, realists (not only the contributors in this book) are more convincing in their criticisms against deflationists than in their positive characterization of objective and sound nature of ontological disputes. Despite the variety of ways of describing the same reality (in Sider's case: the variety of candidate meanings for 'existence'), they claim, there is one privileged way that 'carves nature at the joints' (Lewis/Sider), 'is more natural' (Armstrong/ Sider), 'mirrors better the structure or the world' (Sider), 'has the force of reference magnetism' (Sider). This helplessness is sometimes concretized in typographical resources, putting 'existence' in boldface or in uppercase, or substituting 'existence' by 'reality' (Fine) and supposing that in these ways we 'catch' the 'real' reality beyond every description. Of course, I do not intend this remark as an argument against realism, but as evidence for the deepness of one the most difficult questions of philosophy.

Both Fine and Inwagen defend traditional metaphysics with the same strategy, namely focusing on what has been considered its main concept: existence. But about the nature of existence, they disagree radically. Peter van Inwagen defends, in broad lines, a Quinean conception of existence. Indeed, his contribution is no more than an incisive defense of some views he already defended in his earlier writings. For overcoming the 'emptiness' of the word 'being,' he propose five theses: first, Being is not an activity (it is not something we 'do'); second, Being and Existence are the same (there are no things that do not exist); third, Existence is univocal (like number attribution); fourth, the notion of Existence is best captured by the existential quantifier; and, finally, the best method of deciding ontological commitment was suggested by Quine (evaluating the ontological commitment of our best theories). Although basically no new theses or arguments are presented, Inwagen's enjoyable style and his additional saucy remarks (including one to Putnam) make it worthwhile to read these old ideas again. Kit Fine, on the other hand,

proposed in his article a radical anti-Quinean conception of existence. For Fine, ontological existence question cannot be interpreted as simply quantificational question. The ontological existence questions are substantive, the quantificational questions are not. Further, for Fine, Quine's indispensability argument is not convincing: one can consistently accept that numbers are indispensable for the purposes of science, and claim that they do not really exist 'out there.' But Fine's most forceful argument against the quantificational conception of ontological existence is his analysis of the logical form of existence statements — one of the highlights of the book. But, at the end, Fine, like the other anti-deflationists quoted above, offered no better strategy for deciding Existence (or Reality), other than simply appealing to our intuition for deciding what is 'real.'

I kept the articles of Hofweber and Schaffer for the end of the review, because both are like a fresh breeze in the somewhat muggy metaphysical room. Both propose a more radical revision of our metaphysical thinking. Jonathan Schaffer's paper is a direct reaction against the last two articles discussed about existence. For him, contemporary metaphysicians are too strongly influenced by Quine in supposing that the existence question is 'the' central metaphysical question. He reminds us that the Aristotelian tradition was not so interested in a 'flat' ontology where we simply distinguish what exists from what does not exist. Instead of this, he proposes to focus on the question of what grounds what, i.e. on the relation of ontological dependence, because this would generate a much more interesting hierarchical ontology. For him, dependence questions are not only the most informative, but also more fundamental (existence questions presuppose dependence questions). At the end of his paper he sketches a picture of what such a structural ontology has to look like. However, given his definition of fundamentality ('x is fundamental when nothing grounds s') one could suppose that searching for fundamental entities is just another name for searching for 'real' or 'thick' existence. Of course, still in this case, Schaffer's model yields a more informative ontological structure concerning the many dependence relations between derivate and fundamentals and between the different levels of derivates. In his paper 'Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics,' Thomas Hofweber proposes a change in our worries concerning metaphysics. Epistemological or semantical criticisms are not our most serious challenge, but the other sciences that seem to solve metaphysical puzzles with more authority than philosophers ever had.

We need a modest attitude, recognizing that 'science is well done without metaphysics.' But this does not imply the unambitious attitude of simply accepting the results of science for metaphysical questions. We must have an own domain of questions and an own method in order to be, at the same time, 'modest but ambitious.' How we achieve these aims, is not an easy matter, but it is clear for Hofweber that the appeal to esoteric terminology (like Schaffer's 'priority,' or Fine's 'reality') is not the best option.

The book is without doubt one of the most substantial publications in metaphysics and its methods in recent years. One last very positive aspect of the book is its unity: the reader constantly feels the pleasant tension of the dispute between deflationists and anti-deflationists. Both sides are well represented. And, different from many other books, it is clear that all the authors are engaged in directly answering to each other. This becomes especially clear by the great number of mutual cross-references. 'Talking past each other' is one of the main diagnoses of deflationists against practicing metaphysicians, but by no means applicable to the authors in this book.

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The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature, by Peter Kivy. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, xiii + 155 pp.

The philosophy of literature is typically concerned with the theory of literary creation, the ontology of literary works, or the theory of literary reading. *The Performance of Reading* offers a theory of literary reading. The book contains thirty-five titled short sections.

The main thesis presented is that the reading of literary fiction, including the silent reading of fictional works such as novels, is a performance. The theory is meant to be descriptive of the practice of reading, as opposed to being normative: it is 'a *descriptive* claim about how we, at least some of us, *do* read [literary works]' (p. 2). But the theory appears to be, as the author admits, counterintuive. Kivy's project is to show that the appearance is misleading and that the thesis is plausible.