

David Chalmers, David Manley, Ryan Wasserman, eds.
*Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of
Ontology*.
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Metametaphysics is an excellent collection of papers about the nature and methodology of metaphysics written by the subject's movers and shakers. It will be of great interest to anyone enamored, repulsed, or mystified by metaphysics.

Metaphysics, especially ontology, enjoyed something of a renaissance a few decades ago, at least when compared to the preceding anti-metaphysical currents of the early 20th century. According to lore, this renaissance had two main causes. The first was Quine's alleged purification of ontology: Quine revived ontology by showing us how to do it without indulging in the obscurities which so bothered his positivist predecessors, such as Ayer and Carnap. But there remain questions about the accuracy of this lore and what its legacy ought to be. Peter Van Inwagen's essay articulates and defends Quine's alleged purification. Scott Soames critically examines the nature of the infamous debate between Carnap and Quine, arguing that they were more closely allied than the lore allows. Huw Price argues that Quine's alleged revival of ontology has been vastly overstated.

The second cause of metaphysics' renaissance was the bold metaphysics of Saul Kripke, David Lewis, David Armstrong, Kit Fine, and others in the last part of the 20th century. These philosophers shamelessly invoked supposedly mysterious metaphysical notions (such as possibility, necessity, essence, natural properties, truthmakers, and grounding) and used them toward fruitful and ambitious philosophical ends. Along this trajectory, Bob Hale and Crispin Wright's essay focuses on how the neo-Fregean project uses abstraction principles (such as: the number of *F*s = the number of *G*s iff the *F*s and the *G*s correspond one-to-one) to develop a Platonist view about numbers which avoids its traditional epistemic pitfalls.

However, reading the essays in *Metametaphysics* gives one the impression that the renaissance's days are numbered. This is because most of the essays are each, in one way or the other, concerned with addressing skepticism about metaphysics.

The essays by David Chalmers and Eli Hirsch each defend a broadly neo-Carnapian view according to which answers to many (if not all) metaphysical questions reflect little more than our choices about how to describe reality. The essays by Matti Eklund, John Hawthorne, and Theodore Sider are direct responses to this view. Both Eklund and Hawthorne, although in different ways and toward different ends, object that

neo-Carnapians must reject plausible semantic principles. Sider objects that reality has an objective structure and that metaphysics strives to discover it.

The skeptical threats are manifested in other ways too. Karen Bennett, while unsympathetic to neo-Carnapianism, nevertheless argues that creatures like us are poorly suited to making metaphysical progress. Amie Thomasson rejects much of traditional metaphysics as concerned with unanswerable questions, while favoring a revisionist metaphysics combining conceptual analysis with empirical investigation. Stephen Yablo argues that discourse which apparently carries ontological commitment is, in a peculiar way, ontologically neutral and so ontological questions about the objects of that discourse are factually defective.

The preoccupation with skeptical threats is partly just the playing out of the old epic struggle between metaphysics and epistemology. But there also seems to be a more specific culprit: the nearly universal endorsement of Quine's conception of ontological questions as quantificational questions (which, ironically, was supposed to have purified ontology). For once 'Are *F*s real?' is purified as 'Is there at least one *F*?', then it can seem that only two sensible methodologies emerge for answering such questions: (i) consult our Moorean beliefs ('There's obviously a table there!'); or (ii) consult our best science ('Physics only needs the particles, and not any table over and above them!'). If (i), then it seems that the answers to ontological questions are trivial and uninteresting; but if (ii), then it seems that science, not metaphysics, provides the answers. So either metaphysics trades in trivialities or is made obsolete by science. Thomas Hofweber's essay explicitly concerns finding a place for metaphysics between this rock and hard place, and many of the other essays are at least implicitly wary of this dilemma.

The long shadow skeptical doubts cast upon the essays in *Metametaphysics* might easily give one the impression that metametaphysics is primarily concerned with responding to skeptical challenges to metaphysics. But (fortunately) metametaphysics isn't merely the epistemology of metaphysics. A few maverick contributors are more focused on the *metaphysics* of metaphysics. This is especially evident in the way these mavericks depart from various aspects of the Quinean orthodoxy mentioned earlier. Many of the authors recognize the need to distinguish an ordinary 'metaphysically-unloaded' sense of the quantifiers from their serious 'metaphysically-loaded' sense. But Sider pushes this idea further by building upon Lewis' notion of natural properties and taking reality itself to have natural joints: objective structure which only the metaphysically-loaded sense of the quantifier captures. Ontological questions are quantificational questions; but only a special kind of quantificational question is an ontological question. Kris McDaniel defends a revival of the outmoded distinction between ways of being by arguing that Sider's general notion of structure is really an abstraction upon many particular notions of structure, each corresponding to a distinct way of being.

One last maverick theme opposes contemporary metaphysics' focus on ontology. There are at least two reasons why it is thus focused: (i) Quine's alleged purification of ontology, and (ii) David Lewis' *tour de force* of how an incredible ontology of possible worlds provides broad philosophical payoffs. No wonder, then, that the only anthology on metametaphysics is subtitled *New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology!*

Refreshingly, Jonathan Schaffer and Kit Fine buck this trend. While Schaffer agrees with Quine that ontological questions are quantificational questions, he argues that ontological questions just aren't what metaphysics is really about. It is rather about what is *fundamental* or *prior* (in the sense of being ontologically independent), as opposed to what is *derivative* (in the sense of being ontologically dependent). More radically, Fine rejects what all the other essays (implicitly or explicitly) endorse: the Quinean assimilation of ontological questions to quantificational questions. Instead, Fine defends a primitive metaphysical conception of reality which does not support construing ontological questions quantificationally. Metaphysics is about what facts hold in reality and how they *ground* those facts which do not. Ontology is just a (small) branch of this larger project; it is the branch concerned with which objects the real facts are about.

The contributions of these mavericks seem to be the most refreshing and interesting parts of *Metametaphysics*. It is unfortunate that they did not receive more attention from the other contributors. For one example, Hofweber chastises Schaffer, Fine, and others for making metaphysics an esoteric game playable only by members of an elite club who claim to possess metaphysical concepts, such as fundamentality, ground, and reality. Suspicions about these metaphysical concepts are thus taken to be a reason to conceive of metaphysics without them. But perhaps that is to change the subject. Perhaps the way to rein in metaphysics' excesses of esotericism is not by ignoring its distinctive but elusive concepts, but by confronting them head on.

In any case, it's understandable that metaphysicians want to defend their discipline, especially after feeling so much pressure from skeptics for so long. But it seems as if the skeptics have been allowed to set the terms of the debate. Perhaps some more mavericks are needed.

Nevertheless, this is a first-rate anthology of first-rate essays. These papers, together with David Manley's useful introduction, offer an accurate snapshot of the current state of metametaphysics. Not only that, they also give us an idea where metametaphysics is headed.

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