

Descriptive Metaphysics, Revisionary Metaphysics, Anti-Metaphysics [Betimsel Metafizik, Revizyonist Metafizik, Anti-Metafizik]

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ABSTRACT

This paper observes that P. F. Strawson's distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics is a baffling one from the perspective of traditional metaphysics. If one thinks of metaphysics as the study of the fundamental nature of reality, it is bewildering to divide up metaphysics in this way. The paper then tries to show how the distinction is no longer bewildering if we deny that such study is possible.

Keywords: Metaphysics, descriptive metaphysics, revisionary metaphysics, knowledge, truth-apt.

ÖZET

Bu makale, geleneksel metafizik perspektifinden bakıldığında P. F. Strawson'un betimsel ve revizyonist metafizik ayrımlarının kafa karıştırıcı olduğunu inceler. Metafiziğin realitenin temel doğası üzerine bir inceleme olduğu kabul ediliyorsa, onu böyle bölümlere ayırmak şaşırtıcıdır. Elinizdeki makale, böyle bir incelemenin olasılığının ancak yadsınması halinde, Strawson'ın ayrımlarının şaşırtıcı olmaktan çıkacağını göstermeye çalışacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Metafizik, betimsel metafizik, revizyonist metafizik, bilgi, hakikate uygunluk.

1. What is metaphysics? As a branch of philosophy, metaphysics is the study of the fundamental nature of reality, or at least this is a standard way of explaining what it is. This way might leave someone puzzled, though. They might think that studying the fundamental nature of reality is a job for scientists, yet the people who pursue metaphysics do not for the most part engage in activities typical of natural science or even social science. Their puzzle is ‘Why not?’ Is there something about metaphysics which means that such activities are not appropriate? A metaphysician might seek to explain further what metaphysics is, beyond saying that it is the study of the fundamental nature of reality, so that their approach to the subject is justified. In this paper, I will provide little in the way of further explanation. The bare statement of metaphysics that we have is enough for my purpose, which is to make sense of a distinction between two kinds of metaphysics.

P.F. Strawson opens his book *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* with the following claims:

Metaphysics has been often revisionary, and less often descriptive. Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure. (1959, p. 9)

Strawson distinguishes between two kinds of metaphysics: descriptive and revisionary metaphysics. But from this quotation alone, it is not transparent what each kind of metaphysics involves. For in each case, he tells us what is involved by employing the idea of our thought having a structure. Descriptive metaphysics seeks to describe this structure, whereas revisionary metaphysics seeks to revise it. But we do not immediately comprehend what our thought having a structure amounts to. Something needs to be said therefore about what it is for our thought to have a structure and about why we should think that our thought has a structure.

Strawson has addressed both of these matters (1992, p. 19-20), but there is a way of explaining the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics which does not involve characterizing our thought as having a structure in the first place. We think that there is time, that there is space and that there are physical entities existing over time and occupying space. These are some of our

metaphysical commitments. Descriptive metaphysics aims to describe our metaphysical commitments. Revisionary metaphysics aims to revise them by replacing them with a better set of commitments. There are differences between Strawson's conception of the distinction, which emerges from clarifying the idea of our thought having a structure, and the conception I have just presented. But the points that will be made below can easily be adapted to apply to Strawson's conception and, owing to it being simpler in comparison, I shall henceforth operate with this conception instead.

Strawson's writing gives the impression that, in his eyes, metaphysics can either be exhaustively divided into descriptive and revisionary forms or these are the main divisions. But descriptive metaphysics does not appear to be a form of metaphysics at all. Metaphysics is the study of the fundamental nature of reality, but to simply describe our metaphysical commitments is not to engage in this kind of study. There are details we can add to my formulation of what descriptive metaphysics is. We can be more precise about when a commitment counts as a metaphysical commitment, that is to say, when it is a commitment regarding how the fundamental nature of reality is. And we can be more precise about the 'we' whose commitments are being described. But no filling in of detail, it seems, will dispel the worry that descriptive metaphysics is just not metaphysics at all. In this paper, I am treating a commitment as about the fundamental nature of reality if, should it capture how reality is, then there is either no possibility of reality being different or a possible reality to which the commitment does not correspond is extremely different from the reality that we inhabit. The clause concerning extreme difference is vague, unfortunately, but without it many of the commitments that interest the descriptive metaphysician would not count as metaphysical. Even once these remarks about metaphysical commitments have been made, the worry about the distinction remains.

Strawson's division of metaphysics into descriptive and revisionary forms is not only likely to seem mistaken. Anyone who regards it as mistaken may well be baffled. There are mistakes that are readily understandable. For example, there are mistakes where not making them would involve attending to subtle points, points that are easily overlooked. But if one thinks that Strawson's division of metaphysics is mistaken because descriptive metaphysics is not a study of the fundamental nature of reality, and one then reflects on this mistake, one is likely to find the mistake

itself baffling. ‘Why would anyone think of metaphysics in the way that he does?’ one might wonder. There have been quite a few efforts to make sense of Strawson’s distinction (e.g. Haack, 1979; Hacker, 2001; Snowdon, 2006). One of the reasons why it needs making sense of is because of this question it gives rise to, a question that Strawson’s text does not directly answer. The purpose of the next section will be to answer the question.

2. Why would anyone introduce a distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics? Someone might think along the following lines. Traditional metaphysics – metaphysics as the study of the fundamental nature of reality – cannot be done. The closest pursuits to this study are describing our metaphysical commitments and attempting to revise them by proposing better commitments. If we are going to use the term ‘metaphysics’ for anything, we should use it for these pursuits. I will flesh out this answer below. In doing so, I will consider why some commitments might be regarded as better even if we cannot pursue metaphysics as the study of the fundamental nature of reality.

It is open to question whether it is even possible to study the fundamental nature of reality. Our concepts, one might believe, affect how we perceptually experience and thereby how we think about the nature of reality. For example, we think that there is time, that there is space and that there are physical entities existing over time and occupying space. The concepts we have acquired lead us to experience the world as if there are these things and, consequently, to think about the world in this way. But had our concepts been sufficiently different, we would not experience or think like this. The world would appear differently to us (Rorty, 1972, p. 649-650). It is impossible, though, to determine whether reality corresponds to the way of experiencing and thinking about reality that results from our concepts, or so one might believe. Metaphysics, conceived as the study of the fundamental nature of reality, cannot be pursued.

Someone who makes these claims may not go all the way to the point of saying that there can be no metaphysics. Instead they might judge that there are two pursuits that are as close as one can come to metaphysics, as traditionally conceived, and that it is reasonable to call these pursuits metaphysics, in place of the traditional project of metaphysics. One of these pursuits is describing

the metaphysical commitments that our concepts give rise to. The other is seeking to produce a better set of metaphysical commitments. But this revisionary project should not be conceived of as a project of producing commitments that correspond to the fundamental nature of reality, since it is impossible to determine what this nature is. Rather the commitments are supposed to be better for some other reason. For instance, they may be regarded as better for the purpose of ensuring that people get along with one another. Certain metaphysical commitments, different to the ones we currently have, may be presented as ones which, if taken up, would lead to a higher level of harmony between people. There are many other reasons for why a novel set of metaphysical commitments might be regarded as better, apart from because they correspond to reality. What is important to realize is that revisionary metaphysics, on this proposal, is also not an attempt to determine the fundamental nature of reality (see Hacker, 2001).

Revisionary metaphysics has here been proposed against a background which gives rise to the worry that it is not even possible. If our concepts affect how we experience the world, leading us to certain metaphysical commitments, are these concepts and the metaphysics they lead to not a prison from which we cannot escape? They affect our perceptual experience and through this our metaphysical thinking, so that we cannot think about reality in any other way. Although my initial sketch of how our concepts lead to a specific metaphysics gives rise to this worry, a better explanation of how they do this will defuse it. The way in which our concepts lead to a specific metaphysics is by affecting our perceptual experience so that we experience the world as conforming to this metaphysics. This makes it natural for us to accept this metaphysics. The description of our concepts leading to this metaphysics is perhaps misleading, because it might suggest a stronger connection: that these concepts would cause anyone who has them to adopt this metaphysics. But they merely leave it as the metaphysics which it is natural for us to adopt, given how the world appears to us. This does not exclude the possibility of forming other metaphysical conceptions. The other conceptions available would be limited if we could not form alternative concepts as well, but this possibility is also not excluded. We can practice working with such concepts, in place of the familiar ones, until working with them becomes second nature, initiating a different experience of the world. But the revisionary metaphysician will not say that we are then experiencing the world as it actually is, since we cannot ever detect correspondence according to them.

Instead of saying that we cannot know the fundamental nature of reality, someone might deny that we can study the fundamental nature of reality on other grounds. What look to be true or false propositions about this fundamental nature, they might say, are in fact not truth-apt (Collingwood, 1940, p. 47). Like boos and hurrahs, they have no truth value. But traditional metaphysics requires truth-apt propositions about its subject matter, which it is the job of metaphysicians to assess in terms of whether they are true or not. In this case too, descriptive and revisionary metaphysics may be proposed as the closest alternatives, each worthy of being called metaphysics. These projects must be conceived of differently from how they were conceived above, though. They are not concerned with metaphysical propositions, rather with what, at first blush, look to be metaphysical propositions. The proponent of traditional metaphysics might object that it would be more accurate for this person to say that there is no such thing as metaphysics than give either of these pursuits the title of metaphysics. It is beyond the scope of my paper to evaluate this objection. My only aim is to remove the bafflement that the descriptive and revisionary metaphysics distinction is likely to produce by explaining why that distinction might have been introduced.

Of course, the question remains as to whether Strawson himself denies the possibility of traditional metaphysics. What Strawson says when he introduces the distinction does not provide us with enough evidence to determine this matter. Perhaps somewhere in his writings there is material to resolve this issue. It is more appropriate to pursue this task in a separate paper, owing to the number of relevant texts and the need for detailed analysis of suggestive passages. Leaving aside the specifics of Strawson, the distinction might occur to anyone who regards traditional metaphysics as an impossible pursuit. Furthermore, I think it is bewildering to divide up metaphysics into descriptive and revisionary forms if one does not regard it in this way. To capture this point from the perspective of a traditional metaphysician who remains critical of the division: the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics is not a distinction within metaphysics, rather a distinction within anti-metaphysics.

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