

## Is Metaphysics a Waste of Time?

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Metaphysics serves as a common foundation for the natural sciences and without it they would not, so to speak, have leg to stand on. So it is odd that these days the study of it is commonly dismissed as a waste of time. Perhaps this is to some extent a consequence of poor media management. A scientifically inclined layman reading the preface to *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics*, (2002 edition, Ed. Richard M Gale), a collection of essays by various authors, would have no difficulty in concluding that the subject is not worth their attention or effort. It occupies only a couple of paragraphs but as a review of metaphysics it is devastating.

It is not an accident that none of the included essays attempt to say what metaphysics is, to describe the methods for doing it and the rules or criteria for assessing the success of a metaphysical theory. For all such metaphilosophical attempts have failed miserably.

It is difficult to see any other interpretation of this statement than that metaphysics is not worth studying. That this proposal can appear in such a context makes abundantly clear not just the reluctance of Western academia to study the metaphysics of the Buddha and Lao Tzu, which cannot be described in this way, but also its obliviousness to the considerable achievements of the Western tradition. A person new to metaphysics is likely to assume that a respected publisher's general guide would be a good place to start, and if they are clear thinkers then they will conclude from this statement that studying the discipline or even reading the rest of the guide would be a waste of time. If any doubts remain they are soon banished.

But the history of metaphysics, as well as the essays in this volume, shows that one can successfully engage in the metaphysical language-game even though one cannot articulate the rules of the game in virtue of which we can keep score and thus determine who wins and who loses.

It seems unlikely many people would agree that engaging successfully in a language-game of this kind would be a worthwhile ambition or even a challenging one. An intellectual game for which nobody knows who is winning with rules that cannot be articulated will be profoundly unappealing to any rational thinker. How would it defend its place in the academic curriculum? What would it mean to 'successfully' engage in it? The next sentence nails the lid shut on the coffin.

Not all philosophers accept this favourable evaluation of the history of metaphysics.

It may be true, for truth may be stranger than fiction, that some philosophers hold a lower opinion of metaphysics than this. Far more important, however, and it is a fact we might expect to see mentioned in this context, is that not all philosophers would judge this a favourable evaluation. Some would see it as a hatchet job. By what criteria could it be judged favourable? Does it not clearly state that metaphysics is an unscientific, inconclusive and largely pointless exercise?

...there are deconstructionists of traditional metaphysics who see it as a shocking scandal because it is a history of perennial and intractable disagreements. The disputants cannot even agree upon a decision procedure for resolving their disagreements. This demand for a cognitive discipline to have a decision procedure for determining who is right smacks of scientism...

Can a cognitive discipline have no procedure for making decisions? The idea is surely incomprehensible. In what sense would it be a discipline? The demand for a decision-

making procedure carries no whiff of 'scientism'. A student of metaphysics who does not make this demand cannot hope to make progress. If metaphysics is not a rigorous science of logic then it is idle speculation. Given this low assessment of the discipline by a presumably serious practitioner it is little wonder that many scientists despair at the uselessness of metaphysics, nor that many people see the whole of philosophy as not worth their bother. Metaphysics is reduced to a farce by such words.

The only effective response to the deconstructionist's scientifically-based indictment of metaphysics as meaningless is to do more metaphysics.

A less Orwellian language would have chosen the phrase 'scientifically-based' and made this a more clearly ludicrous statement. What would be the point of doing more and more metaphysics if we can never make any progress and have no method for measuring it even if we do? In what way would failing more energetically and more often be an effective response to scientifically-based criticism of metaphysics or even a response at all? Those of us who see metaphysics as the only way forward for theoretical physics and scientific consciousness studies, it being the only discipline capable of constructing a fundamental or global theory, must despair at the way in which it may sometimes be presented even by its friends. A great many metaphysicians hold a strikingly different view from the one presented in these damaging remarks and would regard this characterisation of their field as a complete misunderstanding. Here is an alternative view.

Metaphysics may be defined as the study of absolutes, first principle or the world-as-a-whole. Its task is to identify cosmological theories or 'theories of everything' which contradict logic, reason or the scientific facts and in this way reveal those that would be

most plausible as descriptions and explanations for the existence of the world and the phenomena studied by the natural sciences. The principle method by which it proceeds is the formal falsification of metaphysical propositions by the derivation of logical contradictions that render them absurd. This is a process of eliminating the impossible in order to reveal the possible as famously relied on by Sherlock Holmes. By the use of the rules for Aristotle's dialectic we decide whether propositions are true, false, meaningless or undecidable. The method works well and produces no results known to conflict with scientific observations or reported personal experiences, an outcome that cannot plausibly be a coincidence. By the use of this formal method, the rules for which were codified by Aristotle with more subtlety than they may often be applied, metaphysicians are able to determine that all metaphysical position except one are logically indefensible. This is the most important and best known result of metaphysics and the main reason why it is difficult. It is probably the most important fact an academic guide to the discipline could explain. If this were not a well-established and well-known result of metaphysical analysis then there would be no justification for pessimistic philosophical approaches such as *logical positivism*, *dialethism*, *naturalistic dualism* and *mysterianism* or for the despairing remarks made about metaphysics in the *Guide* quoted here. It is only because metaphysics produces this result that it has a long history of unresolved disagreements, for because of it we are led to argue endlessly for the truth of competing dialectically opposed theories none of which work. Hence Kant's observation that Western metaphysics is an arena for staging mock fights in which nobody ever gains an inch of ground. Yet this is a demonstrably unjustified criticism. Philosophers in the West have proved beyond doubt that all positive and extreme answers for metaphysical questions are logically self-defeating, and this is a lot more than an inch of ground. It is only when this result is unacceptable to us that we need question the rules of the game or the point of playing it. If we have seen and conceded the

absurdity of all extreme *this* or *that* answers for metaphysical questions then we have played the game and won it. In a reasonable universe we would expect a rigorous process of abduction to falsify all world-theories except one, perhaps two or three at most where they are nearly equivalent, and if this is what metaphysics does then it cannot be criticised for it. It is a result we would expect and hope for, and it gives us confidence in our method. There cannot be more than one correct metaphysical theory and, if the universe is reasonable, then no more than one that is logically defensible. That metaphysics allows us to reduce almost all theories to absurdity is evidence of its reliability and effectiveness.

Philosophers in all traditions find that metaphysics does not endorse a partial, selective or positive world-theory. All such theories are found to give rise to contradictions. If any of them are correct then the universe is paradoxical and will remain forever incomprehensible to us. If metaphysics refuses to produce a positive result, however, then this does not mean it produces no result. This *is* a result and a crucially important clue to the nature of reality. It does not entail that we must dismiss metaphysics as useless, as it is generally thought in Western academia, but merely steers us towards a different kind of theory. The problem here, if there is a problem, is simply that this different kind of theory is the nondual theory endorsed by the Buddha and Lao Tzu, which in metaphysics translates as a neutral theory. This is the only fundamental theory not rejected by metaphysics. Yet it is widely ignored in metaphysics and even in modern consciousness studies has attracted little attention. Is it merely a coincidence that both disciplines are crippled by 'hard' problems?

The situation is therefore more straightforward and hopeful than most philosophers would have us believe. For as long as metaphysics fails to refute the neutral metaphysical

theory endorsed by the Buddha and Lao Tzu it will remain possible that metaphysics, by rejecting all other theories, performs its job admirably according to tried and trustworthy rules. All other theories are redundant and implausible. If we do not concede this then we must abandon the 'laws of thought' for the sake of a theory we know can be reduced to absurdity and then have to defend this strategy by claiming that metaphysics has no method for making decisions. Yet it is perfectly capable of deciding that all metaphysical questions are undecidable, and if this result seems uninterpretable to us then is this not evidence of any fault with the methods of metaphysics.

The metaphysical scheme of Middle Way Buddhism, which for metaphysicians may be the most accessible example of the 'Perennial philosophy' or 'mysticism', is not partial, selective or positive. It cannot be refuted in the Aristotelian dialectic and is the only cosmological doctrine for which this can be said. It is not demonstrably correct and can never be so for logic cannot prove what is true and false, only what is and is not logically absurd, but it is unique among metaphysical theories in that it cannot be reduced to absurdity. On this view metaphysics is a straightforward study by which we eliminate logically indefensible theories to leave only those that survive analysis. Its well-documented and endlessly repeatable result is that all extreme theories are logically indefensible and a neutral one is irrefutable. The central problem of metaphysics is understanding this result, not demonstrating it.

The reaction of philosophers to this result divides them into two distinctive camps, often clumsily identified as 'Eastern' and 'Western'. For philosophers in these traditions the defining difference would be their respective willingness to accept and investigate the results of their own calculations. The Blackwell *Guide* makes it clear that Western metaphysicians are unwilling to do this, preferring to dismiss metaphysics as hopeless.

Meanwhile, the Buddhist philosopher-monk Nagarjuna, on behalf of the Perennial tradition, goes to great lengths to demonstrate this result and explain it. In the metaphysical literature of mysticism there is no talk of modifying the laws of dialectical logic or of having no rules for deciding between fundamental theories. The refusal of metaphysics to endorse a positive or extreme theory is interpreted as a demonstrable logical proof of what is the case, which would be that the world-as-a-whole is best described by a neutral metaphysical theory. This is what we discover when we play the game of metaphysics strictly by the rules and make clear decisions.

Why, then, do so many people, even many philosophers, conclude that metaphysics is an unimportant or even pointless exercise? This pessimism can be explained by the fact that the metaphysical scheme of mysticism is uninteresting and unknown to many philosophers and consequently much misunderstood. Apparently, it seems clear to most metaphysicians that mysticism has no systematic metaphysic underpinning all its fine talk of cosmology and soteriology, psychology and phenomenology and so a dismissive view persists in large areas of metaphysics. Consequently, the same view persists in physics, consciousness studies and all other disciplines where it is an orthodoxy that metaphysical problems are too hard to solve and metaphysics is more or less useless. By leaping to this conclusion metaphysicians shoot themselves in the foot, for if there is no systematic and logically defensible metaphysical scheme underpinning the teachings of the Buddha and Lao Tzu, and if all other schemes are logically indefensible, then metaphysics can never have a solution for its problems. It would be doomed to remain forever an arena for mock fights, a more descriptive phrase than 'waste of time' but equivalent.

Fortunately, it has never been shown that a low view of mysticism is justified. This is to the credit of metaphysics. In metaphysics, if we play by the rules, we cannot dismiss the

philosophical foundation of mysticism as false unless we can show that it would give rise to logical contradictions. Until then all we can do, and only then on an individual basis, is to dismiss our method of refutation as a waste of time for failing to refute it, as in effect the Blackwell *Guide* advises us to do. Only if a neutral theory is false would we need to doubt a decision-making procedure that concludes it is true. There is nothing to stop us doubting this result but there would be a high price to pay. We would then be unable to defend our discipline when it is dismissed as unscientific or pointless for it is ourselves who have made it so. If we to stick to our method and pursue analysis to its bitter end then we must arrive where logical analysis always arrives, at the conclusion that all positive metaphysical theories are logically absurd. Now we face a simple choice. We can choose to see this conclusion as a dead end or we can see it as a fact from which to derive an extended metaphysical theory. We have no other option. We cannot undo our calculations but must choose on which path to continue where one heads West and the other East. The confusion, depression and stagnation we see in stereotypically Western philosophy is not caused by its failure to produce a clear result but by its refusal to accept the clear result it produces and investigate its implications. The claim that metaphysics has no rules for making decisions-allows us to avoid having to accept this result but this would be to deliberately upset the chess-board at the last minute in order to avoid losing the game, which up until this moment we have been playing by the very rules we are now denying. Metaphysics is then reduced to the sham science described by the Blackwell *Guide*. Such a metaphysics might well be thought of as a waste of time, for while it is capable of establishing the problems of philosophy it rules out of consideration their only available solution. This is not, however, all of metaphysics, merely a particular approach that has been known not to work at least since the days of Plato. Its key feature is a careful avoidance of mysticism. For a study of mysticism we would have to accept rather than fight against the results of metaphysics.



In answer to the question in the title, then, we could say that whether we see metaphysics as a waste of time will depend crucially on whether we accept its results or reject them. In the Western tradition they are widely rejected or ignored, thus the negative evaluation so many philosophers award the discipline, while in the tradition of the East they are accepted. Yet, oddly, it is the former that characterizes itself as 'rational'.

That metaphysics and mysticism are not irrelevant to each other and one may shine a light on the other may not be an easy concession to make for some, but once we make it then metaphysics becomes a lot easier to do up to a point. The demand it makes in an academic context are considerable but asking a metaphysical question and trying to answer it is all that would be required for actually doing metaphysics, and asking a few of them soon brings even the amateur investigator to the point on which the two main traditions part company, which is how to interpret the refusal of metaphysics to produce a positive answer for any question of first principles. We are now standing at the exit from Kant's arena and must decide between staying and leaving, which is to say choose whether to accept this result or reject it. Once out, if we choose to accept it, all theories except one can be abandoned and we can focus on reaching an understanding of the one that remains. This is the theory that predicts and explains the failure of all positive metaphysical theories. Thus metaphysics becomes a lot easier to do, at least in the early stages, for those who do not fight against it.

It is sometimes argued, for instance by the dialethists, that a neutral metaphysical theory disobeys the laws of dialectical logic. To counter this idea an examination of those laws would be necessary. Aristotle's rules for the dialectic are intended as a formalisation of

the way in which human beings naturally and probably unavoidably think, and we have normally started to use them by the time we are able to talk. They describe the way our minds work and we need not study the rules in order to at least get started in metaphysics. We might perhaps start with the Something-Nothing problem, the question of whether the universe begins with, reduces to, is emergent from or simply *is* one or the other. This is one of the more approachable of metaphysical problems and discussions of it tend to be briefer and more straightforward than they are for some others, even if they are ultimately no less confusing. If they ask themselves this question most people will soon discover that the idea the extended universe begins with or arises from Something or Nothing makes no sense. Both horns of this dilemma may be refuted in the dialectic and this is why they form a dilemma. We may reach this conclusion after quite a short time and in a quite casual way but should not doubt that it is an important philosophical result. It tells us something important about the universe and about the way in which we think. It tells us that the universe is more extraordinary than anybody can think. If we proceed in this fashion, approaching in turn the problems of freewill-determinism, externalism-internalism, mind-matter, one-many, dualism-monism and so forth, then we will eventually end up having to choose between the view that metaphysics and mysticism are in full agreement such that neither is a waste of time and the view that metaphysics has no decision-making procedure and is a mock science, with the ineluctable implication that mysticism has no defensible philosophical foundation and is a lot of tosh. It is an all or nothing decision, for metaphysics and mysticism must stand or fall together. There would be no need to work through many different problems since metaphysicians have done the hard work. All we need do is confirm that the Something-Nothing problem and all metaphysical dilemmas remain as problematic in metaphysics today as ever, something we can do by reference to a general introduction, an online browse or by extrapolation from the preface to the Blackwell

guide to the subject. If all these questions are still problems today after centuries of painstaking analysis by thousands of greater minds than our own then it can only be because all their positive solutions would break the rules of Aristotle's logic and must be judged unsatisfactory. Once we have noted that all these dilemmas are formed from pairs of contradictory and complementary pairs of positive metaphysical positions then we have reached a fork in the path and must decide whether to believe the Buddha's explanation for their undecidability or give up and adopt the pessimism of mainstream Western philosophy.

If we choose the former then rather than being self-effacing about our discipline we can say that the refutation of all positive or partial metaphysical theories is its proudest achievement. It tells us what the world is really like and in such a way that we might expect scientists and philosophers to sit up and take notice. Things would be different if there were no alternative to these failed theories and *all* metaphysical theories could be refuted, for then some despair would be justified, but if the alternative to these failed theories is the one endorsed by the Buddha and Lao Tzu with all that this would imply for the natural sciences, the nature of reality, the meaning of life, the relationship between science and religion and more, then it would be difficult to argue that metaphysics is not a vital and practically useful area of study. Only if we reject its conclusions would it become a snake-pit of competing theories none of which work, scorned by physics and consciousness studies for its endless prevarication and inability to make decisions. If we respect its decisions then we can say metaphysics is a straightforward formal discipline akin to mathematics that may be used to show that all but one metaphysical theory gives rise to logical contradictions, the single exception being the neutral theory endorsed by all the world's wisdom traditions, without need of further complication or fear of contradiction.