

# Metaphysics as Essentially Imaginative and Aiming at Understanding

Michaela Markham McSweeney

**Abstract:** I explore the view that metaphysics is essentially imaginative. I argue that the central goal of metaphysics on this view is understanding, not truth. Metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative provides novel answers to challenges to both the value and epistemic status of metaphysics.

## Introduction

There are (at least) two perennial challenges to metaphysics: How could metaphysics be valuable? And how could metaphysical beliefs be justified? Recently, some philosophers have attempted to answer at least some of these questions by claiming that the only way that metaphysics can meet these challenges is to be continuous with science. There are two ways this might be cashed out; first, *ontologically* or *metaphysically*: that there is nothing ‘supernatural’ or outside the bounds of what we might ordinarily think of as being in the domain of the sciences. Second, *methodologically*: that in order for metaphysics to be valuable and justified, its methodology (and, perhaps, its goals) must be continuous with the methodology of science. Here, I will be exclusively focused on the latter (to be sharpened later) claim, and will refer to it as the *naturalistic claim*.<sup>1</sup>

I explore a different picture of metaphysics, according to which the answers to these questions are to be found in the fact that metaphysics, like art, expands our imaginative capacities: metaphysics is an essentially imaginative pursuit. Insofar as this is a descriptive claim, it is true only of some metaphysical work. So the picture is normative: I envision a picture of metaphysics on which it is essentially imaginative, and explore what work this might do in answering the perennial challenges.

It is often suggested that in addition to art’s aesthetic value, it might also be valuable because it expands our imaginative capacities by allowing us to see ourselves, each other, or the world from a different perspective. Expanding our imaginative capacities in this way is intrinsically valuable, but is also instrumental to making us more empathetic, as well as to inculcating other emotions, values, or ideas in us that might make us better people. While these claims may be contentious, I take them for granted in this paper.

On the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative view that I begin to develop here, a central goal of metaphysical theorizing is understanding—that is, what metaphysicians should want from their readers is for their readers to gain as full of an understanding as possible of their theories. And metaphysicians’ goals in elaborating their own theories should also be to gain a full understanding of their own theories. It might also be that metaphysics aims at truth, or that metaphysical realism is true, but neither of these things are required for metaphysics to aim at understanding. Thus, the question of how beliefs in metaphysical theories could be justified is disconnected from the question of what the value of metaphysics is.

---

<sup>1</sup> A broad but very incomplete list of examples: Ladyman and Ross (2007) propound the naturalistic claim and also try to develop a metaphysics that satisfies it; Bryant (2017) argues that non-naturalistic metaphysics’ only value is instrumental (to naturalistic metaphysics); Morganti and Tahko (2017) try to develop a ‘moderate’ naturalistic metaphysics which would likely not satisfy the other naturalists here, but which my view is just as much a response to; Maclaurin and Dyke (2011) argue that non-naturalistic metaphysics lacks pragmatic value. Quine’s naturalism and “web of belief” view (e.g. 1951, 1970) seems to entail the naturalistic claim, and neo-quinean metaphysicians’ methodology typically either implicitly or explicitly embraces it (e.g. Sider (2011)).

The closest view to mine (that I know of) is Rosen’s (forthcoming). Rosen motivates a kind of agnostic fictionalism about speculative metaphysics. Conceiving of metaphysics as essentially imaginative also lends itself to fictionalism about metaphysics. This is not, however, for any of the reasons that normally motivate us to move to fictionalism. Instead, it is because treating metaphysics as essentially imaginative makes metaphysics similar to fictional art in important ways. I think that fictionalism is false, though. While I won’t motivate that view here, I will say some things about why metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative does not entail that we should be fictionalists, and also will begin to address how we might begin to start combining the view with metaphysical realism (though much more needs to be said here).

### 1. Metaphysics as Essentially Imaginative

There is a vast literature on what imagination is that I won’t have space to engage with in detail. I will leave things loose and informal, and appeal to the pre-theoretic notion of imagination that Gendler and Liao describe like this:

To imagine is to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are. One can use imagination to represent possibilities other than the actual, to represent times other than the present, and to represent perspectives other than one’s own. Unlike perceiving and believing, imagining something does not require one to consider that something to be the case. (Gendler and Liao 2019).

Many philosophers have pointed out that imagination is *up to us* in a certain important way that perception is not.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, imaginative pursuits are up to us in certain important ways. Insofar as arts are imaginative pursuits, they are creative. Authors and painters and sculptors determine the content, shape, composition, etc. of their work. One difference between an essentially imaginative pursuit and one that just happens to involve some imaginative work is that essentially imaginative pursuits are up to us in this kind of way. This also explains why natural science is not an essentially imaginative pursuit: science clearly involves imaginative work, especially in its more theoretical aspects, and in particular in the creative aspect of *coming up with* scientific theories but science is not up to us in the same way that art is. The way the natural world is—at least, the ways that we can observe and discover the natural world is—constrains and shapes our scientific theories. While the way the natural world also constrains certain things about art, that is in virtue of the us being the kind of creatures we are, unable to break laws of nature or transcend our humanity. Art need not *answer to* the natural world in the same way that natural science does.

Metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative captures some, but not all, of actual metaphysical theorizing. Metaphysical views are often wild, and seem far from how the world actually appears, or what common sense tells us about it. They don’t attempt to represent the manifest image, but rather to represent some way the world might be “underneath” the appearances. I suspect that, in day-to-day life, the world did not appear to Spinoza the way he described it (1667), or to Lewis the way he described it (e.g. in his (1986).) (Though both had, I think, metaphysical views that are consistent with, or even explain, the manifest image. What I mean is that there are crucial features of their views—e.g. the monism in Spinoza’s case, and the concrete modal realism in Lewis’s—that it is quite unlikely seemed to either of them to be mere reporting on some combination of their

---

<sup>2</sup> See Wittgenstein (1981, §632), Sartre (1972: 7); Gendler and Liao (2019) and Balcerak Jackson (2019) both use the ‘up to us’ terminology.

perceptual experiences + ‘common sense’.) Other metaphysical views are similar: compositional nihilism requires some re-envisioning of reality. So do ontologies of sets and spacetime points, or only properties.

Such views are developed by their authors doing imaginative work: imagining coherent ways the world might be. I mostly am—intentionally, but not for reasons of perceived relative importance!—focusing on metaphysical views that can be seen as attempts to develop pictures of reality that aren’t centrally about us, our activities, or the parts of the world we create. But there is something importantly common here between this claim and ameliorative social metaphysics, which is also—perhaps more obviously—crucially imaginative: I take it our task there is, at least in part, to imagine a politically better world, and to try to literally create that world through shifting our concepts, language, and ontology itself.

One might point out that metaphysicians sometimes argue for views on which something like a mix of perceptual information and ‘common sense’ accurately describe what reality is like. (For example, take ‘conservative’ views about ontology, which say that ordinary objects like tables and frogs exist, but extraordinary ones like turkey-trouts and ‘incars’ do not, e.g. Markosian (1998), Korman (2015).) These views look less imaginative. But later, I will argue that they fit the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative picture.

Our above definition says that to imagine “is to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are”. If Lewis and Spinoza believed their views, then in what sense are they imaginings? Imaginings are supposed to be contrasted with beliefs, in that they don’t aim at things as they actually are, as well as with perception, which perhaps can be thought of as forcing an appearance (or, simply, the world, depending on one’s view of perception) upon us. The key here is in the idea that imaginings aren’t supposed to aim at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are. Many metaphysicians must engage in imaginative work because, initially, their views do not subjectively seem to them to be true, even if they believe them.

Thus, the idea is, imagination can play a crucial role in *transforming* how the world subjectively seems to us. Gendler and Liao say that “One can use imagination to represent possibilities other than the actual, to represent times other than the present, and to represent perspectives other than one’s own.” But one can also use imagination to represent possibilities and perspectives *in order* to make them our own; that is, in order to make them subjectively seem true to us. While he is not talking about metaphysics as a whole, nor about subjective seeming, but rather about conceivability, Yablo suggests something very similar to this: “It cannot be a prerequisite of imagining an X to be under the prior impression that Xs can exist. Which leaves... as the likelier explanation: it comes to me that Xs are possible in the act of imagining one.” (1993, 30). Yablo’s idea is that we don’t wait until we find some world conceivable in order to imagine it; rather, we imagine that state of the world in order to determine whether it is conceivable.

Yablo says that “it cannot be a prerequisite of imagining an X to be under the prior impression that Xs can exist”. (1993, 30). This is right, but more can be said. For we also use imagination to gain a better understanding of our own beliefs, by making our beliefs subjectively seem true to us. In doing so, we come to better understand the things that we believe. I think that this is part of what metaphysical theorizing is for, for the metaphysician herself, on the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative view: to turn her own propositional beliefs into full-on subjective seemings.

What do I mean by the world *subjectively seeming* some way to us? There are plenty of things that most of us believe, but that don't subjectively seem to be true to us. Subjective seeming requires either belief plus in-the-moment perceptual experience (it subjectively seems to me as I write this sentence that I am on an airplane, because I both believe that and am having a perceptual experience of being on an airplane), or belief plus phenomenal imagination of that belief (it subjectively seems to me that rabbits have big ears, because I both believe that and phenomenally imagine that rabbits have big ears).<sup>3</sup>

What about *phenomenal imagination*? Roughly, it is having some kind of phenomenology that isn't immediately and directly caused by something external to me; that is non-propositional; and that represents things as being thus-and-so. While propositional imagination is not phenomenal imagination, I don't want to suggest that we need to be able to visualize (or even sensorily imagine with another sense) an object in order to phenomenally imagine it. Perhaps phenomenal imagination is akin to Yablo's 'objectual imagination': imagining the tiger itself, which he suggests does not require sensory imagination, but can be distinguished from propositional imagination in that it (a) lacks alethic content and (b) is referential (1993, 27).

But the simplest examples of phenomenal imagination all involve visualization, and subjective seeming is also best understood by example. It subjectively seems to me that the tennis ball in front of me is roughly spherical, and I believe that it is roughly spherical: I have a propositional belief that it is roughly spherical, but I also have an associated perceptual experience that (seemingly veridically) represents the ball as being roughly spherical. In this case, I also phenomenally imagine the ball as roughly spherical: if I close my eyes and try to imagine the ball, or it isn't in my presence, I imagine it as roughly spherical.

With the tennis ball, we have perceptual experience and belief that together seem to ground our phenomenal imagination of the ball as being roughly spherical. But perceptual experience of an object being a certain way is not necessary for us to phenomenally imagine the object being that way. Most of us believe that the earth is roughly spherical. If subjective seeming requires that we veridically *perceive it as such*, then it does not subjectively seem to most of us (e.g. not astronauts) that the earth is roughly spherical. But subjective seeming requires *either* belief plus either perceptual representation of the world as matching the belief *or* phenomenal imagination of the world as matching the belief. And both belief and phenomenal imagination can be grounded in things other than perceptual experience. It subjectively seems to most of us that the earth is roughly spherical, and that DNA has a helix structure, even though most of us have never directly perceived either the earth or DNA as such.

In contrast, consider special relativity. Many of us (who know about basic physics and who can ignore pessimistic doubts) believe that special relativity is true. But, it doesn't subjectively seem to any of us that special relativity is true, because it is at least very hard—maybe impossible—to

---

<sup>3</sup> Thus 'subjective seeming' is a technical term I am introducing, but it is closely related to uses of 'sensory seeming' and 'perceptual seeming' in the literature. However, such terms typically aren't intended to the second, and more important for my purposes here, sense of 'subjective seeming' for me: phenomenal *imagination* plus belief. Rather, they are typically taken to involve something like immediate perception (rather than perceptual imagination). That aside, by requiring that subjective seeming involves a perceptual or phenomenally imaginative state plus a belief state, the existing account of perceptual seeming that my view is closest to is what Chudnoff and DiDomenico (2015, p. 536) refer to as the 'composition view'—that perceptual seeming involves a perceptual state *and* a 'seeming' state. For endorsements of this view (broadly construed), see e.g. Brogaard (2013, f. 7), Conee (2013, p. 54), Lyons (2015), Tucker (2010, p. 532).

phenomenally imagine special relativity's being true. And many of us believe that the temperature of the earth's core is about 6000 degrees Celsius. But it does not subjectively seem to be so (though it might well subjectively seem that the earth's core is very hot). Finally, consider a very different kind of case: you read in the newspaper that your childhood best friend, who you know to be sweet, kind, and caring (but who you have lost touch with) has pled guilty to murder. You (might) come to believe that your friend is a murderer, but I doubt that it will subjectively seem to you that your friend is a murderer.

These cases suggest that one route towards being able to phenomenally imagine something that we don't have perceptual access to is having lots of access to various kinds of models or representations of the fact in question (e.g. drawings or three-dimensional models of DNA, globes, two-dimensional images that 'look' three-dimensional, etc.). It's not enough to have a physical model of the thing in question (we have models of the earth that are cut open and include its core); our models have to represent the very property in question in a way that gives us some kind of indirect perceptual awareness of what it is for the object to have that property.

When you close your eyes and conjure up an image of (if you can do so) the earth, you tend to imagine something that appears to be spherical. When you close your eyes and conjure up an image of DNA, it is helix-shaped. But we (arguably) *can't* close our eyes and visually imagine what it is like for special relativity to be true, or imagine the heat of the earth's core. One reason that models help us learn is that they allow us to make our beliefs seem subjectively true by helping us phenomenally imagine what they represent. We base our visual imagining of DNA on the many models (and other kinds of representations) of DNA that we have seen.

There is an important connection between subjective seeming and understanding. Phenomenal imagination can help us understand what the world would be like if a theory were true. So, if we believe that the theory is true, subjective seeming can help us understand what it is that we actually believe about the world. While he was talking about a different kind of model, I think this is part of what was behind Einstein's (1919) suggestion that only 'constructive' theories—theories with constructive models—can get us true understanding.<sup>4</sup>

Another way that something can subjectively seem true to us can be seen by altering the murderer case: you have remained close to your friend while watching him become more and more angry, violent, and aggressive; you have seen him assault someone at a bar. And now it is reported to you that he murdered someone. You didn't witness this murder. You don't have perceptual awareness that he murdered someone—your evidence is testimonial—but it may well subjectively seem to you that he did murder someone, because it is continuous with your knowledge of him, and thus easy to both phenomenally imagine and believe because it is "in character".

There are other ways for it to subjectively seem that the world is a certain way. But the third important way for our purposes is this: coming up with and articulating the theory that things are thus-and-so can help the world subjectively seem to be thus-and-so to us. We don't have a visual model of concrete modal realism, but we do have a whole book that allows us to attempt to imagine what the world would be like if concrete modal realism. I assume that Lewis and Spinoza genuinely believed their own views. Of course, we don't know whether they subjectively seemed true to them. But often, part of the process of creating imaginative philosophical theories involves a kind of

---

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion, see my (2020).

subjectively coming to see the theory as true, rather than merely believing it. While philosophers might not start out, when they engage in investigation into the world, with the world subjectively seeming as their theories say it is, many of us end up there. The process of defending and articulating a metaphysical view can move the author of that view from not having a subjective seeming that the view is true to having one—even if the author initially believed the view. And since subjective seeming is a route to understanding, as it allows us to understand what the world is like if that theory is true, this makes sense of the fact that articulating a theory—one that might involve propositions that we already believed—allows us to come to understand that theory in a way that we might not have before articulating it. One value of articulating metaphysical theories, for the metaphysician herself, is to gain better understanding of things she already believes.

What about the metaphysician's audience? We needn't believe a metaphysical theory in order to phenomenally imagine it as true. We can attempt to phenomenally imagine that they are true, even if we don't believe them. We can also, as we perhaps do with fiction, occupy a middle ground between phenomenal imagination and full-blown subjective seeming: we can *suspend our disbelief* in a theory and phenomenally imagine that it is true, thus, perhaps, having it temporarily subjectively seem to us that it is true. And maybe this is enough for understanding; maybe what we need for understanding is to be able to get in a position where it can, temporarily but non-fleetingly, subjectively seem to us to be true.

One of the goals of e.g. the novelist and the metaphysician is, at a coarse-grained level, quite similar: to convince the reader to briefly suspend their ordinary beliefs about the world around them and 'get inside' a different reality. What does it mean to get inside this 'different' reality (which might, in the metaphysics case, simply be our reality)? I claim: it is for it to (at least temporarily) subjectively seem to be true.

## **2. How does this help with the value and justification challenges?**

If metaphysics is essentially imaginative, then it is much more like art than like science. (I note that plenty of *parts* of science seem to have much in common with metaphysics and art in this respect: the so-called "context of discovery" seems replete with imaginative work. But, I remind my reader, science is not *up to us* in the way that both art and, I am arguing, metaphysics are.)<sup>5</sup> This suggests that we don't need to answer the justification challenge in order to answer the value challenge. (The justification challenge is not: why are we justified in engaging in metaphysical theorizing? Rather, it is: how could we be justified in believing a particular metaphysical theory?) If metaphysics is essentially imaginative, we don't need to ever be justified in believing a metaphysical thesis in order for metaphysics to be valuable, just as we needn't be justified in believing that a novel is literally true in order for the novel to be valuable. Indeed, it might be the (albeit temporary) *unjustified* belief (plus phenomenal imagination) that the circumstances of the novel are literally true that, in part, make reading the novel valuable.

One value of art is that it expands our imagination and imaginative capacities. There is independent value in both expanding our imagination and imaginative capacities, and in being able to "see the world" from someone else's perspective. The non-social metaphysics I'm focusing on here doesn't

---

<sup>5</sup> I note that Rosen (forthcoming) flirts with the idea that metaphysics is just all "context of discovery", and so I owe this way of thinking about this to him.

give us any direct insight into what it's like to be a different person.<sup>6</sup> It doesn't obviously help us morally. But it does (when done well) allow us to inhabit other perspectives on reality, and it does help us expand our imagination and imaginative capacities. So even if these turn out to be the only values of metaphysics, metaphysics is still valuable if it is essentially imaginative.

Inhabiting other perspectives on reality requires that we (a) temporarily suspend any disbelief we have as to the truth or accuracy of those perspectives and (b) be able to genuinely imagine what the world looks like from those perspectives. And this is one way to come to understand something.

Fiction—as well as art more broadly—sometimes has a goal of understanding. But on the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative picture, metaphysics is special in that its goal is always understanding. If understanding is important independent of truth, justification, or knowledge—and I think there is a good case to be made that it is, though it will perhaps disappoint readers that I won't make it here—then metaphysics is valuable because it facilitates our understanding, even if the content of what we are understanding turns out to be false.<sup>7</sup>

Good fiction has an additional value that much of metaphysics lacks: aesthetic value. I think that aesthetic value is actually crucial to good metaphysics as well, but the value in question might be somewhat different; perhaps the aesthetic value of a well-written piece of metaphysical theory lies somewhere in between the kind of aesthetic value that literature has and that of a beautiful mathematical proof. This kind of value, despite being important, is not my focus here. However, one might think that the value of imagination, and of facilitating understanding itself, is aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic as well. Rosen gestures at a view in this vicinity about the value of theory-building in speculative metaphysics:

The value of science on this conception is partly cognitive. To know that quantum electrodynamics is an acceptable theory is to know quite a lot about nature. But it is also partly “aesthetic”, though the term is not quite right... When we admire a complex work of art, we don't just admire the object. We respond to the fact that a person made it by exercising certain capacities — technical skill, but also the creative capacity to see that a thing like this could be made. On the view I'm urging, scientific model-building has a similar value, and it has this value regardless of whether it's an oracle for disclosing hidden truths that would be intrinsically worth knowing. If there is a defense of speculative metaphysics as the fictionalist conceives it—metaphysics as model-building — it runs along similar lines (Rosen forthcoming, 16.)

I largely agree with Rosen here about the value question, but I think he misses some of the sources of value in metaphysics: those that come directly from phenomenal imagination, subjective seeming, and understanding.

Fictionalism is a natural extension of the view that metaphysics is essentially imaginative, and it allows us to dispense with the justification question. I've claimed that understanding should be seen as one of the central goals of metaphysics. But if understanding only requires temporary subjective

---

<sup>6</sup> Though it might give us indirect insight, if we like the Nietzschean idea that philosophy is ‘involuntary and unconscious autobiography’, or, as I do, some more socially situated version of this idea.

<sup>7</sup> See my (redacted) for the beginnings of an account of the importance of understanding independently of other epistemic aims.

seeming—of the kind we can get when we temporarily suspend disbelief in e.g. the world of Middle Sister in Anna Burns’ novel *Milkman* and have the world subjectively seem to us as it does to an eighteen-year-old Catholic woman in 1970s Belfast—then to understand something does *not* require having a justified belief in it. So, if metaphysics is essentially imaginative, and a central goal of metaphysics is understanding, we might not need to answer the justification question at all. Certainly we are not actually justified in believing that we are in 1970s Belfast. Still, there is something important in us understanding what it was like to be an eighteen year old woman in 1970s Belfast, and we arguably can’t come to understand that solely through historical record. Likewise, perhaps we are never really justified in believing metaphysical theories, if their value is in us coming to understand what the world would be like if they were true.

However, not all of us will want to take the step to fictionalism. Insofar as anyone thinks that metaphysics also aims at truth, and is not just like fiction, we still need to answer the justification question. Thus far what I’ve said suggests that believing a metaphysical thesis can be conceived of as an experience akin to the experience of suspending one’s ordinary beliefs and temporarily ‘believing’ a fiction (or even akin to simply experiencing a work of art that doesn’t make any propositional assertions). The crucial difference (for the non-fictionalist) is that, while the fiction is neither literally true nor aims to be literally true—and in typical cases, we have overwhelming evidence that it is not true—the metaphysical thesis might be, and we rarely have overwhelming evidence that it is not true. (More carefully: we rarely have overwhelming evidence that it is not a disjunct of a perhaps very long disjunction that itself is likely to be true—where all the possible views in logical space about the particular topic/domain are in the disjunction.) So, unlike in the fictional case, what we are justified in believing is that the metaphysical thesis is an epistemic possibility about the way the world is. On one picture of justification, we actually can’t be justified in believing particular metaphysical theories, but we can be justified in believing that particular metaphysical theories might be true.

If metaphysics is essentially imaginative, then one of the goals of metaphysics and fiction is similar: to get the reader to suspend disbelief and have it subjectively seem that the theory or fiction is true. The important difference is that when we suspend disbelief and it temporarily subjectively seems to us that a fiction is true, we do not (typically) learn that the fiction is actually a genuine way the world might be. But when we do so with a metaphysical theory, we do learn that that theory is a genuine way the world might be.

So, one option for the non-fictionalist might be to go the humble route: we are never *really* justified in believing any particular metaphysical thesis, but we still learn things about the world when we suspend disbelief and allow the world to subjectively seem to us as a metaphysical theory says it is. We might learn, for example, that the world might be like *p*, for some *p*. Balcerak Jackson (2018) argues that we can get this kind of justification from imagination. I suspect we can actually get something stronger for metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative. To see what it might look like, I want to take a brief detour by asking what the point of argument is if metaphysics is essentially imaginative.

### 3. What are Arguments For?

According to the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative picture, metaphysicians’ central goal is—or rather, should be—to give us a ‘picture’ (metaphorically speaking) of reality that can get us into a space in which it (at least temporarily) *subjectively seems to us* that the world is the way they claim it is; and thus, for us to come to understand their views. This makes it sound as though metaphysics has a



lot—too much, perhaps—in common with certain kinds of art. So what are arguments for on this picture? Perhaps arguments themselves have aesthetic value akin to that of mathematical proofs. While I think here is something beautiful about an original, well-crafted, argument, this is not my focus here.

Arguments play an important role in both answering the justification challenge and in establishing understanding through imagination. There might not be anything even *prima facie* inconsistent with metaphysics centrally involving arguments and also being essentially imaginative. Arguments in philosophy are often thought of as attempts to convince the reader of a view. This is consistent with my picture on which the goal of the metaphysician should be to get the reader to fully understand her view, by helping her to temporarily suspend disbelief and get the world to subjectively seem as the view says it is—the convincingness of an argument maps onto how able we are to successfully suspend disbelief and have the view subjectively seem true.

There are many different ways that artists can convince their appreciators of a certain kind of way of looking at the world, or a fiction, or a different perspective. In some photography and painting, for example, this is done by making a photo or painting appear to be ‘from’ a certain perspective in space, and positioning the viewer in a position that is quite close to that. In some works of written fiction, this is done by writing in evocative language that draws the reader into, at least briefly, ‘seeing’ the world through the perspective of a character.

On the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative view, the role of arguments in metaphysics is similar to the role of these other ways of convincing viewers and readers of certain kinds of pictures of and perspectives on reality. I will give two examples. First, there is a picture of philosophical argumentation on which I convince you to adopt a view by appealing only to things that you already believe—or to which I can quickly convince you to assent to—and show you that a conclusion that you perhaps initially found somewhat wild and implausible (or simply had not considered) follows. Maybe this sort of argument, the idea is, is like art for the hyper-rational. (I don’t mean this as a compliment, even though I enjoy such arguments!) Sometimes art appeals to our *emotions* in order to allow us to see reality (or non-reality!) differently. But arguments seem to appeal to our ability to reason to do so. Some of us might be more moved into temporary subjective seemings by emotions, others by hard, dry, logic-chopping. (I note that this distinction is not at all as clear as I am making it out to be.) That said, one might worry about whether hard, dry logic-chopping can really secure phenomenal imagination and thus whether it can get us full-on subjective seeming rather than just belief. But think about the two murderer cases. We don’t need much to be moved to imagine that our friend who we have seen violently assaulting someone has murdered someone. But we need a lot if it seems out of character (from our perspective) for him. It may be that if metaphysical views are close enough in character to what already subjectively seems to us to be true, we can be moved, and perhaps that we need more picture-painting and hand-holding when it comes to metaphysical views that are very far away from what subjectively seems to us to be true. Starting with premises that themselves seem subjectively true makes it easier to be moved towards a conclusion’s seeming subjectively true.

Many arguments in metaphysics don’t fit this pattern. One common move in contemporary metaphysics involves trying to rescue a view from a serious—perhaps seemingly devastating—objection. Two very different examples: first, some attempts to recover platonism from epistemic (or “reliability”) challenges give arguments about how particular versions of the view can successfully answer those challenges. These arguments are often the central arguments in favor of

the view—that is, their authors are not trying to convince you of platonism. Instead, they are trying to convince you that there is a way past a stumbling block for platonism. The idea here is this, I take it: platonism is a view that is already plausible for a variety of reasons, but the epistemic challenge blocks us from being able to imagine the world as platonistic. So if we can successfully answer that challenge, we can go back to imagining the world as platonistic. (See, e.g., Balaguer (1998), McSweeney (ms).)

Second, return to the ‘common sense’ theories of composition (e.g. Korman (2015), Markosian (1998)). These theories are no different in kind from attempts to recover platonism. Problems have been raised for common-sense views about composition, such that many metaphysicians now seem to find the view to be a non-starter; that is, they aren’t willing to engage in even imagining that the world is as our common sense says it is, compositionally speaking. In this sense, views that say that the world is just as it initially seems to be to us can count as imaginative, because they are aimed at metaphysicians who have been convinced to rule out such a view. And the way in which they are imaginative is not in conceiving of the world differently from the way it appears to us—for the view is that the world is basically just as it appears to us! Instead, they aim to allow those of us who have been swayed by objections to *re-conceive* of the world that way, by providing us with a way to overcome (in this case multiple!) stumbling blocks to doing so.

Arguments play two crucial roles in justification on this picture. First, philosophers with certain views of justification might like the idea that, if metaphysics is fundamentally imaginative, at best it can provide us with justification for believing that *p* is a way the world might be. But arguments still play an important role in motivating that *p* is a way the world might be. They can serve to sway us into being able to suspend disbelief and let the world subjectively seem as their authors claim it is. I’ve argued (in (redacted)) that a necessary epistemic condition for justified belief that two theories are metaphysically equivalent is that we can conceive of what it would be like for them simultaneously being true. If this is right, then we need to be able to conceive of what it is like for *one* of the theories to be true before we can compare it to others. It seems to me that we can’t be justified in believing that a metaphysical theory even might be true unless we can conceive of what it would be like for it to be true.<sup>8</sup> I claim: what it is to be able to conceive of what it would be like for a theory to be true is to be able to temporarily suspend disbelief in that theory and phenomenally imagine that it is true—that is, for it to temporarily subjectively seem that the theory is true. Since arguments are used to overcome stumbling blocks to doing so, and hence to helping us better *understand* the view, they are crucial to even the minimal level of justification that we should want for the belief that a theory *might* be true.

Second, arguments can convince those who have certain theoretical commitments that a metaphysical view is consistent with those commitments, and hence might be true. In some ways this is just a special case of what I just described. Many philosophers treat certain sorts of methodological commitments as sacred beliefs (e.g. naturalism, which I will discuss in the next section), and are unable to get in a space where the world can subjectively seem to them to be some way that is inconsistent with those methodological commitments. What is a sacred belief? Here I follow Katsafanas’s account of sacred values. Katsafanas argues that sacred values are values that are *invulnerable* (‘present themselves as not to be compromised or attenuated’), *unquestionable* (‘present

---

<sup>8</sup> This is a contentious claim; this doesn’t seem to be a necessary condition on justified belief that a scientific theory might be true, and so those who want to assimilate metaphysics to science shouldn’t be happy with it. See (redacted) for discussion.

themselves as not to be doubted, critiqued, or weighed against other values’), and *associated with characteristic emotions* (‘love, hatred, veneration, contempt, reverence, dread, awe, etc.’). (2019, 12.) While Katsafanas is concerned with sacred values’ role in fanaticism of a more weighty kind (e.g. religious, political, moral), it seems to me that many philosophers—including (apparently) non-moral philosophers—have methodological stances that satisfy at least the first two of these conditions. These ‘sacred beliefs’ might be a sort of epistemic analogue of the more normative sacred values that satisfy all three conditions.

That philosophers have sacred beliefs is not surprising, bad, nor even necessarily unjustified. However, sacred beliefs get in the way of our ability to temporarily suspend disbelief and have the world subjectively seem some way that is inconsistent with those beliefs. So one way that metaphysicians can get their readers to entertain their views is to argue that they are consistent with methodological commitments that are commonly held to be sacred.

This same strategy might justify us in either actually full-on believing, or adjusting our credences in, certain metaphysical views on other views of justification. If we’re coherentists, then arguments can serve a crucial role not just in allowing us to suspend judgment and have the world subjectively seem a certain way, but in actually justifying us in *believing* that the world is that way, or having a significant credence in the world being that way. The Quinean web of belief can make sense, on the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative view, both of how we could be justified in believing metaphysical theories, and why we still need arguments. Arguments show us what other beliefs our metaphysical theories are bound up with, and what beliefs we would have to shift around in order to accommodate them.<sup>9</sup>

There is much more to say here, in particular if we want to secure metaphysical realism. I don’t have the space to argue that we can do so here. Instead, I emphasize that the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative claim is consistent with there being no need to answer the justification question; whether the justification question needs answering depends on whether metaphysics aims at truth. And whether metaphysics aims at truth is independent of whether metaphysics is essentially imaginative. Still, I’ve tried to show that justification is still possible if metaphysics is essentially imaginative.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4. What about the Naturalistic Claim?**

One common naturalistic move is to try to make (acceptable) metaphysics continuous with science: a posteriori metaphysics, with goals similar to those of science, and that works within the bounds of what science tells us about the world, is acceptable, and other, more “speculative” metaphysics is not.

If the value of metaphysics comes even partly from its being an imaginative pursuit, what should we say about this claim? While it perhaps doesn’t make sense to talk about things that are *up to us* as being also a priori (since they may not, initially speaking, be candidates for being propositions that we know or are justified in believing), clearly metaphysics-as-imaginative is conducive to a priori metaphysical projects. And the naturalistic view just described is unhappy with a priori metaphysics;

---

<sup>9</sup> I part ways here with Rosen, who argues that the considerations at stake in arguments in ‘speculative’ metaphysics are esoteric and ‘play no role whatsoever outside of technical philosophy’ (forthcoming, 10).

<sup>10</sup> Looking to work on whether and how we can get knowledge or justification from imagination is a next step here, e.g. the papers in Kind and Kung (2016).

it, superficially at least, should be even more unhappy with the idea that metaphysics is not just a priori, but *up to us*. But this is too quick: perhaps naturalists who hold the kinds of views under discussion here should take the very fact that treating metaphysics as essentially imaginative makes metaphysics up to us to entail that metaphysics is outside of the bounds of the kind of inquiry that must be continuous with science in order to be meaningful.

For presumably naturalists don't think that artistic creation needs to be continuous with scientific investigation into reality. (Note: this is not an ontological claim about whether naturalists think that aesthetic properties supervene on or are grounded in descriptive properties; that claim is consistent with the idea that artistic creation is methodologically distinctive and does not (and should not) proceed in the same fashion as scientific investigation does.) If metaphysics is more like art than science—if it is essentially imaginative and (at least in part) 'up to us'—then there is no reason that it should be *like* science.

Naturalists are free, of course, to only engage with metaphysical views which are consistent with their naturalistic commitments. Arguments that a view is consistent with naturalism can serve to convince them to take a metaphysical view seriously enough to suspend disbelief and attempt to get the world to subjectively seem to them as the metaphysical view says it is.

But if metaphysics is essentially imaginative, and among its goals are to allow us to have the world subjectively seem to us ways that we might not have previously imagined it might be, then I suspect that taking any claim that rules out engagement with vast swaths of metaphysics to be a sacred belief is a mistake. At least one part of what is important and valuable about metaphysics is imagination and understanding, and treating methodological stances as sacred makes us lose out on vast swaths of metaphysics. This isn't an attack on naturalists—the same kind of thing can be said about, e.g., those who treat theism as sacred in engaging with metaphysics. On the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative view, this is a mistake along the same lines as refusing to engage with non-religious art. I'm neither a naturalist nor a theist, but I fall prey to holding certain things to be sacred such that I can't have someone's metaphysical view subjectively seem, temporarily, to be true to me, and thus understand it.

There are other things that matter besides truth. Imagination is both intrinsically and instrumentally (in part because it can lead to understanding) valuable. Understanding is an important goal of certain kinds of inquiry. On the metaphysics-as-essentially-imaginative view, both imagination and understanding are central to what metaphysics is for. But justified belief aims at truth, not imaginative capacity, or understanding. If we focus too much on having justified beliefs, it is harder for us to suspend disbelief and try to inhabit views that we don't believe. And there is value in doing so.

### References:

Balaguer, Mark. 1998. *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Balcerak Jackson, Magdalena. 2018. 'Justification by Imagination,' in *Perceptual Imagination and Perceptual Memory*, eds. Fiona MacPherson and Fabian Dorsch (Oxford University Press), pp. 209-224.

Brogaard, Berit. 2013. 'Phenomenal Seemings and Sensible Dogmatism,' in *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, C. Tucker (ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 270-92.

Bryant, Amanda. 2017. "Keep the chickens cooped: the epistemic inadequacy of free-range metaphysics," *Synthese*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1398-8>.

Burns, Anna. 2018. *Milkman*. (London: Faber & Faber Press).

Chudnoff, Elijah and DiDomenico, David. 2015. "The Epistemic Unity of Perception." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 96, pp. 535-549.

Conee, Earl. 2013. 'Seeming Evidence,' in *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, C. Tucker (ed.) New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 52-70.

Einstein, A. 1919. 'What is the Theory of Relativity?' *The London Times*. Reprinted in: Einstein, A. 1982. *Ideas and Opinions*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Katsafanas, Paul. 2019. "Fanaticism and Sacred Values," *Philosophers' Imprint*, vol. 19, no. 17, pp. 1-20.

Kind, Amy and Peter Kung (eds.). 2016. *Knowledge Through Imagination*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press.)

Korman, Daniel Z. *Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary*. (New York: Oxford University Press.)

Ladyman, James, and Don Ross. 2007. *Everything Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press.)

Lewis, David. 1986. *On The Plurality of Worlds*. CITE.

Liao, Shen-yi and Gendler, Tamar, "Imagination," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/imagination/>

Lyons, Jack. 2015. 'Seemings and Justification,' *Analysis*, vol. 75, no. 1, pp. 153-64.

Maclaurin, James, and Heather Dyke. 2012. "What is Analytic Metaphysics For?," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 90, no. 2, pp. 291-306.

Markosian, Ned. 1998. 'Brutal Composition,' *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 92, no. 3, pp. 211-249.

McSweeney, Michaela. 2020. 'Theories as Recipes: Third-Order Virtue and Vice,' *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 177, no. 2, pp. 391-411.

McSweeney, Michaela. Manuscript. *Abstract Structures*.

- Morganti, Matteo and Tuomas Tahko. 2017. "Moderately Naturalistic Metaphysics," *Synthese*, vol. 194, no. 7, pp. 2557-2580.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1989. *Beyond Good and Evil*. trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Vintage).
- Quine, W.V.O. 1951. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 60, pp. 20-43.
- Quine, W.V.O. and J.S. Ullian. 1970. *The Web of Belief*. New York: Random House.
- Rosen, Gideon. Forthcoming. "Metaphysics as a Fiction," in *Fictionalism in Philosophy*, eds. Bradley Armour-Garb and Frederick Kroon (Oxford University Press).
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1972. *The Psychology of the Imagination*. (London: Methuen).
- Sider, Theodore. 2011. *Writing the Book of the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Spinoza, Benedict. 1677. "Ethics," in *The Collected Writings of Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. Edwin Curley. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- Tucker, Chris. 2010. "Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism," *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 529-45.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1981. *Zettel*, trans G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Yablo, Stephen. 1993. "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 1-42.