Mark Balaguer, Metaphysics, Sophistry, and Illusion: Toward a Widespread Non-Factualism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, Pp1-274

In Metaphysics, Sophistry, and Illusion: Toward a Widespread Non-Factualism, Mark Balaguer defenders what he calls neo-positivism.

Neo-positivism is the view that metaphysical questions completely decompose into ordinary empirical questions that can be answered by scientific enquiry (*empirical*) or ordinary logical or modal questions, which can be answered by appeal to a metaphysically innocent modalism (*modal* *innocence*) or questions that are non-factual, that is questions that are such that the world does not provide the question with a determinate answer (*nonfactualism*).

There is much to like about this book. It forcefully, and at times compellingly, presents a new vision of metaphysics. It forces us to re-engage with questions about what we are doing when we do metaphysics, and presents a startling different picture to many that have emerged in recent times. Rather than conceiving of metaphysics as the search for the fundamental joints of reality, or for those things that give rise to the non-fundamental things we see around us, it argues for a quite different approach.

While Balaguer often talks about the anti-metaphysical conclusions that he puts forward, it is clear that this is a book that does metaphysics; it trades in the sorts of arguments with which metaphysicians are familiar, and in doing so it gets right down into the metaphysical trenches. Moreover, it takes seriously the sorts of questions with which metaphysicians are interested. The book does not aim to trivialise the project of metaphysics or to suggest that its practitioners are a bunch of clueless Muppets. The book is anti-metaphysical only in that it argues for neo-positivism, a view that is very different from most of those currently on the market.

The first of the three planks of the book—*empirical*—will be familiar to most readers. It is the idea that (some) metaphysical questions are best answered by first analysing relevant concepts, and secondly, with that analysis in hand, determining whether anything in the world answers to those concepts. Those who see metaphysics as being in the business of solving various location problems will find these ideas familiar, and will likely not find much to disagree with here.

The second two planks—*modal innocence* and *nonfactualism­*—will strike most readers as much more controversial, and the bulk of the book is devoted to defending these views.

While Balaguer thinks that many questions have nonfactualist answers, he focuses on arguing for mathematical and compositional nonfactualism. Mathematical nonfactualism is the view that our mathematical sentences purport to be about abstract objects, but that there’s no fact of the matter whether there are any such objects, and hence no fact of the matter whether those sentences are true. Compositional nonfactualism is, *mutatis mutandis,* the same view about the compositional sentences and composite objects.

There is a rich tapestry of arguments offered in favour of nonfactualism of each kind. Very roughly, the idea is that we have no idea what it would be for there to exist the relevant objects (mathematical objects or composite objects) in the sense that we don’t know what the existence of those things could consist in. If that is right, then we don’t know what the world would need to be like to be one in which there are such objects, and so we don’t know whether it’s a world in which sentences that purport to be about such objects are true. That is because our usage and intentions don’t determine possible-world truth conditions for those sentences (since we don’t know what it would take for such objects to exist) and hence those sentences don’t take a truth-value.

One way of putting some meat on the bones of the claim that we have no idea what it would be for there to exist the relevant objects is to argue that for each determinate answer we might give about whether the relevant objects exist, (assuming the question is a substantive one) that answer is mysterious, unmotivated and implausible. If all of the determinate answers are like this, then we have some reason to conclude that we don't really know what it would be for such objects to exist.

The broad argument that each determinate answer is mysterious, unmotivated and implausible is as follows. That answer might take the form of a necessitarian response. One might say that, determinately, the objects exist and necessarily so, or that determinately, the objects fails to exist and necessarily so. (In the case of composite objects the claim would be that, of necessity, if there are some simples are arranged in some way then a composite object either exists, or fails to, of necessity). But neither of these necessitarian positions is very compelling, so goes the thought, because it seems clear that we are able to conceive of worlds in which the objects exist, and also to conceive of worlds in which they don't, and we don’t have any good story about why some of these worlds really are possible, and others not. There is no apparent contradiction in the existence (or not) of the objects in question, and no account of why our conceivings lead us so astray. So we should reject each necessitarian answer.

The contingentist answer is no better. Consider a world, *w*, which is microphysically way *M*. If the relevant objects exist in *w* then the fact that they exist is something over and above the world simply being way *M*. Yet these higher-level facts are, despite being contingent, empirically undetectable. Indeed, according to contingentism there is another world, *w\*,* that is microphysically way *M*, but in which the higher-level facts do not obtain because the relevant objects do not exist. So the facts about the existence of these objects fail to supervene on the micro-level physical facts. But this seems mysterious, and suggests that contingentism is not true. So none of the candidate determinate answers is true, and that leads us back to the idea that there is no determinate answer: nonfactualism is true.

I’ve ridden rough-shod over many of the finer details of the argumentation here, but the book issues an important challenge for those who think that there are determinate answers to these questions. I suspect that many of us will see the arguments against contingentism as a reason to lean into necessitarianism. I think is scope to argue that the respect in which we don't know what the existence of these objects could consist in, is the product of the fact that nothing could, possibly, exist in anything like that manner. There is no existence of that sort to be had, and as such our attempts to think about and describe what that sort of existence consists in are in some good sense empty, at least insofar as they have no possible-worlds content. But if that is right then we should conclude that, determinately, such objects fail to exist, not that there’s no fact of the matter whether they exist.

That brings us to the third plank of the book: modal innocence. Balaguer needs to defend modal innocence because metaphysics deals in modal questions, and if they are not innocent it’s hard to see how their answers could be empirical or nonfactual (thus showing that neo-positivism is false). Moreover, Balaguer himself appeals to modal claims in his defence of the plausibility of nonfactualism.

If nonfactualism about mathematical and composite objects is true, then there’s no fact of the matter whether theories that make reference to those objects are true. But our mathematical and scientific theories do just that, so there’s no fact of the matter whether *those* theories are true. That seems bad. In order to mitigate this, Balaguer argues that even though these theories are not true, they have a certain kind of ‘correctness’—fictionalistic correctness—which means that we can treat them for all practical purposes as true. The relevant fiction is then spelled out in terms of what *would have been true*, had certain facts obtained. In the case of mathematical fictionalism, the fictionalist account is one in which a mathematical sentence is fictionalisically correct if and only if it would have been true if Platonism had been true. Compositional fictionalism is the view that a composite object sentence is fictionalisically correct if and only if it would have been true if compositional realism had been true. So in each case the brand of fictionalism appeals to various counterfactuals (or counterpossibles).

In order to make sense of these modal claims within the neo-positivist framework Balaguer develops a view he calls *modal nothingism.* The idea is that modal sentences are true, but that they are not made true by anything about the world. More carefully, some modal truths are made true by other modal truths, but that at the bottom sit brute modal truths that are not made true by anything. This latter claim, to be clear, is not simply that there are no local truthmakers that make these modal truths true: rather, the claim is that these fundamental modal truths do not supervene on the way our world is.

Modal claims such as ‘there could have been flying saucers’ involve primitive modal operators rather than quantification over possible worlds. These modal operators—POSSIBLY and NECESSARILY— are primitive sentential operators defined in the usual way. So to say that there could have been flying saucers is just to say that POSSIBLY there are flying saucers.

Then it is claims of the form POSSIBLY P, and NECESSARILY Q, that are not made true by anything, and which, in turn, alongside facts about our world make true other modal claims such as, for instance, that if x is a piece of Gold then necessarily x has atomic number 79.

The picture of how these brute truths, alongside truths about our world (such as that the gold stuff has atomic number 79), serve as truthmakers for modal claims is an attractive one. But it’s hard not to blanch at the idea that there are basic modal truths of the form POSSIBLY P and NECESESARLY Q. Suppose I want to know whether some arrangement of fundamental properties is possible. It doesn’t seem as though this should be a brute matter. Indeed, the fact that the entire modal edifice is supported by such brute truths makes the discomfort even more extreme. So, for me, it remains open whether neo-positivism is a viable view.

Nevertheless, regardless of whether one is won over by neo-positivism writ large, the book is a great read.

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