



Meta-metaphysics, constructivism, and psychology as queen of the sciences

James A. Mollison¹

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Abstract

Remhof contends that Nietzsche is a metaphysician. According to his Meta-Metaphysical Argument, Nietzsche's texts satisfy the criteria for an adequate conception of metaphysics. According to his Constructivist Argument, Nietzsche adopts a metaphysical position on which concepts' application conditions constitute the identity conditions of their objects. This article critically appraises these arguments. I maintain that the criteria advanced in the Meta-Metaphysical Argument are collectively insufficient for delineating metaphysics as a distinct field of inquiry and that the Constructivist Argument attributes a position to Nietzsche that remains vulnerable to his evaluative and psychological indictments of two-world metaphysics. I conclude by discussing how these objections might help non-metaphysical readers of Nietzsche resist Remhof's interpretation.

Keywords Nietzsche · Meta-metaphysics · Metaphysics · Constructivism · Values · Psychology

No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense which faith in science presupposes *thereby affirm another world* than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this 'other world,' must they not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, *our world?* [...] It is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests. [...] Even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine... (GS 344)¹

Nietzsche's relationship to metaphysics is complicated. On the one hand, he includes himself among the "godless anti-metaphysicians" who demand that all

¹ Citations to Nietzsche use abbreviations listed in the references. Roman numerals refer to major divisions within works. Arabic numerals refer to section numbers unless otherwise indicated.

✉ James A. Mollison
Jmolliso@purdue.edu

¹ Purdue University, 100 N. University Street, West Lafayette, IN 47906, USA

convictions adopt “the modesty of a hypothesis.” On the other hand, he declares that “those who are truthful in [this] audacious and ultimate sense” remain committed to “*a metaphysical faith*” in the value of truth (*GS* 344). Since even “godless anti-metaphysicians” espouse metaphysical articles of faith, on Nietzsche’s view, it is unsurprising that controversies persist over whether he opposes metaphysics *categorically* or merely opposes some *type* of metaphysics while advancing an alternate metaphysical account.

Justin Remhof’s *Nietzsche as Metaphysician* (2023) aims to put these controversies to rest. According to Remhof, a problem with extant interpretations of Nietzsche as a metaphysician is that, by analyzing Nietzsche’s first-order metaphysical commitments, these “Metaphysical Readings” “run the risk of begging the question against their antimetaphysical opponents.” Remhof’s strategy for overcoming this impasse is admirably clear. As he explains: “If the Non-Metaphysical Reading is right, then for some reason, Nietzsche finds metaphysical philosophy distinctively problematic. I argue that Nietzsche does not find metaphysical philosophy distinctively problematic. So, the Non-Metaphysical Reading is wrong, and the Metaphysical Reading is right” (2023, p. 2). At its broadest level, *Nietzsche as Metaphysician* seeks to prove the soundness of this *modus tollens* argument.

Even this rough sketch of Remhof’s project may inspire skepticism, however. Nietzsche repeatedly insists that there *is* something distinctively problematic about metaphysics—namely, that it requires valuing some “true world” over and against *this* world. Such characterizations of metaphysics as life-denying recur from Nietzsche’s middle works (*HH* I:5, 8–10, 15–18, 20–21; *GS* 151, 344, 347; *Z* I: “Hinterworldly”; *WEN*, pp. 226, 236–37) through to his last (*BGE* 12, 14; *GM* I:6; III:5, 24; *A* 10; *TI* “Reason” 5–6; “True World”; *WLN*, pp. 73, 141–42, 153). If metaphysics requires valuing some “true” world above *this* world, as Nietzsche never tires of stressing, then *Nietzsche as Metaphysician* seems doomed from the start.

Remhof tackles this problem early and directly. He contends that “there is no reason to identify metaphysics *across the board* with the two-world views Nietzsche rejects, despite the fact that he himself often makes [this] mistake” (2023, p. 11). Reiterating the point, Remhof writes: “metaphysics is not identical with two-world metaphysics. Nietzsche might think otherwise, of course, but he is wrong to do so” (p. 53; see also pp. 15, 63, 67–69, 101–02). This *proviso* reveals that Remhof aims to prove—not that Nietzsche does not find metaphysics *as he understands it* distinctively problematic, but—that Nietzsche’s philosophy does not yield distinctive problems for some *broader* conception of metaphysics that need not divide worlds. Remhof offers much support for this claim. He contends that Nietzsche does not consider metaphysical *questions* distinctively problematic, in the sense of being unanswerable, because Nietzsche embraces a constructivist position that fixes metaphysical concepts’ application conditions (chap. 2). Call this “the Constructivist Argument.” He also argues that Nietzsche does not consider metaphysical *answers* distinctively problematic by advancing criteria that constrain adequate characterizations of metaphysics (chap. 3) that are satisfied by Nietzsche’s texts (chap. 4). Call this “the Meta-Metaphysical Argument.” What’s more, Remhof further argues that Nietzsche cannot deem metaphysical *methods* (chap. 5) or *subjects* (chap. 6)

distinctively problematic, as these also figure in his writings. He concludes that Nietzsche, despite his own claims to the contrary, is a metaphysician.

While each of Remhof's arguments repays careful study, in what follows I critically appraise the Meta-Metaphysical and Constructivist Arguments, respectively. I maintain that the Meta-Metaphysical Argument fails to prove that Nietzsche actively engages in metaphysics because its criteria are collectively insufficient for demarcating metaphysics as a distinct domain of inquiry. Next, I suggest that the position the Constructivist Argument attributes to Nietzsche remains vulnerable to his evaluative and psychological indictments of two-world metaphysics. To conclude, I suggest how these objections might help non-metaphysical readers of Nietzsche resist Remhof's interpretation.

1 The meta-metaphysical argument

The Meta-Metaphysical Argument seeks to prove that Nietzsche is a metaphysician without begging the question against Non-Metaphysical Readings. Stage one of the argument advances "independently plausible criteria for what should constrain any adequate characterization of metaphysics" (p. 53). The argument's second stage shows that Nietzsche's texts satisfy these criteria (pp. 68–103), thereby providing reason to think that he is a metaphysician. Here, I examine the *first stage* of the Meta-Metaphysical Argument. If the criteria this stage advances are insufficient for delineating metaphysical claims and arguments from their non-metaphysical counterparts, then whether Nietzsche satisfies the criteria is moot. He could satisfy them without engaging in metaphysics.

According to Remhof, any adequate characterization of metaphysics should satisfy the following conditions.

Criterion 1: It "must somehow distinguish metaphysics from science" (p. 56).

Criterion 2: It must hold that "metaphysics must investigate and draw conclusions about the nature of reality and do significant work to justify those conclusions with sound arguments" (p. 57).

Criterion 3: It must "to some extent respect the actual practices of metaphysicians" (p. 60).

Criteria 1 and 2, taken together, are insufficient for delineating metaphysics as a distinct domain of inquiry. As Remhof observes: "the first two criteria can be satisfied by all sorts of apparently non-metaphysical endeavors, such as sociology, cultural studies, and linguistics" (p. 59). Remhof implies that these disciplines are non-scientific.² And while they traffic arguments about the nature of reality, they

² It is unclear whether *Nietzsche* would consider these disciplines non-scientific. As one commentator observes, Nietzsche uses *Wissenschaft* to denote "any organized study or body of knowledge, including [...] what we call the humanities" (Williams 2001, p. x). So, Nietzsche might *not* distinguish metaphysics from science. Remhof could set Nietzsche's understanding of science aside with his view of metaphysics, though.

fall short of metaphysics *sensu stricto*. Such cases prompt Remhof to ask: “How do we distinguish metaphysics proper from non-metaphysical fields of inquiry that are merely enmeshed in metaphysics?” (p. 59). Criterion 3 purportedly does just this.

At first blush, criterion 3 looks question-begging: it defines metaphysics by appealing to what *metaphysicians* do. But Remhof can be read more charitably. He analyzes “the actual practices of metaphysicians” in terms of “being sensitive to and interested in the questions [...] ‘What exists?’ and ‘What is the nature or structure of what exists?’” Criterion 3 accordingly claims that adequate characterizations of metaphysics must countenance a unique “conversational context,” where one is sensitive to and interested in questions about what exists and about the nature of what exists (p. 60). Remhof provides the following example.

Say that my partner [...] utters randomly, “There is a brick house on Elm Street.” One could contend that this loosely satisfies the first two criteria—assuming my partner can justify it—and thus one might contend that my partner is making a metaphysical claim. Yet there seems to be no good reason to think that my partner is doing metaphysics.

The third criterion can substantiate this intuition. My partner’s claim does not show sensitivity to the questions that motivate metaphysics, and therefore, when uttered, there is no shift to a metaphysical context of investigation. Hence, my partner’s claim is not metaphysical. (p. 61)

Whereas metaphysics *proper* conveys sensitivity to and interest in paradigmatically metaphysical questions, mere metaphysical *enmeshment* does not.

I remain dissatisfied. Granted, criterion 3 lets us conclude that isolated statements such as “There is a brick house on Elm Street” are not metaphysical, strictly speaking. But a vast gulf separates utterances of this kind and, say, Leibniz’s *Monadology*. Lying between these extremes, as all controversial cases surely do, are *varying degrees* of sensitivity to and interest in the questions “What exists?” and “What is the nature or structure of what exists?” Further complicating matters, the *reasons* or *motivations* behind such sensitivity and interest are also pertinent. Someone advancing arguments, say, about the average number of syllables in metaphysical questions might be *highly* sensitive to and interested in the questions “What exists?” and “What is the nature of what exists?” But this person is not *doing metaphysics*: her motivations lie elsewhere. What about someone who expresses sensitivity to and interest in metaphysical questions *en route* to analyzing metaphysician’s values and psychological profiles (*HH* I:16–17, 21; *GS* P:2, 151, 347; *BGE* 6, 12, 14, 61; *GM* I:13; *TI* “Errors;” *WLN*, pp. 141–42, 153)? I am unsure—though commenting on metaphysicians is presumably distinct from metaphysics proper. Unfortunately, criterion 3 provides no metric for diagnosing such cases. It lacks a bright line for determining what *degree* and *sort* of sensitivity to and interest in metaphysical questions is sufficient for engaging in metaphysics proper.³ Since criterion 3 does not remedy

³ Regarding criterion 3, Remhof asserts: “Nietzsche’s texts straightforwardly satisfy this criterion, so there is no need to go on at length” (100). The subsequent paragraph provides many supporting citations but offers no suggestion as to whether these passages are sensitive to and interested in metaphysical questions in the degree and manner sufficient to evoke a metaphysical conversational context.

the insufficiency of criteria 1 and 2, the first stage of the Meta-Metaphysical Argument fails to provide conditions that collectively suffice for demarcating metaphysical inquiry.

In all fairness, Remhof repeatedly characterizes the criteria advanced in the Meta-Metaphysical Argument's first stage as merely "constraining" adequate conceptions of metaphysics (pp. 15, 53, 56, 64, 67). But if the criteria are just necessary and not sufficient, then the Meta-Metaphysical Argument's second stage cannot function as intended. If stage one provides only necessary but not sufficient conditions for metaphysics proper, then no amount of evidence that Nietzsche satisfies these conditions will prove that he *is* a metaphysician, just that he *could* be one. Absent a sufficiency claim in stage one of the Meta-Metaphysical Argument, non-metaphysical readers are free to conclude that Nietzsche is enmeshed in metaphysics—perhaps *thoroughly* enmeshed—but is not engaged in metaphysics proper.⁴

2 The constructivist argument

I will now suggest that Nietzsche identifies a distinctive problem with individuals highly sensitive to and interested in metaphysical questions themselves.⁵ If the interpretation that follows is defensible, it will not only raise doubts about whether Nietzsche satisfies the necessary conditions of metaphysics proper. It will also present a *prima facie* challenge to the Constructivist Argument, as the position it attributes to Nietzsche aspires to answer questions that, on the reading that follows, Nietzsche finds fundamentally fraught.

Nietzsche as Metaphysician's second chapter addresses a version of the problem at hand. There, Remhof considers whether "Nietzsche thinks metaphysics is distinctively problematic because metaphysics asks *unanswerable* questions" (p. 24). This conclusion holds if Nietzsche deems metaphysical questions meaningless (pp. 24–26), if he denies that answers to metaphysical questions are truth-evaluable (pp. 26–32), or if he thinks that evolutionary constraints on cognition make answers to metaphysical questions inaccessible (pp. 32–34). Remhof rebuts each of these readings with the Constructivist Argument.⁶ The argument claims, first, that Nietzsche holds that "reference is first fixed when a speaker devises and applies a term to something [such that] reference is then successful

⁴ If the Meta-Metaphysical Argument provides only necessary conditions for metaphysics, one might also worry that Remhof's seemingly innocuous request that Nietzsche identifies a distinctive problem with metaphysics is actually quite demanding. The request would be akin to asking someone to identify a distinctive problem with architecture while only informing them that architecture must respect the laws of physics. Moreover, even if Nietzsche *did* deem all non-scientific existence claims supported by argument with the necessary interest and sensitivity problematic, a Metaphysical Reader could retort: "*that* problem isn't *distinctively* metaphysical; its scope is more general."

⁵ I specify "metaphysical questions themselves" to distinguish individuals interested in such questions *simpliciter* from individuals interested in them for *other reasons*—e.g., because they figure in a larger object of study.

⁶ For an extended defense of reading Nietzsche as a metaphysical constructivist, see Remhof (2018).

if the use of the term is causally connected back to the initial dubbing” (p. 37).⁷ Second, the Constructivist Argument claims that Nietzsche adopts a post-Kantian position on which “there is a constitutive relation between concepts and their objects.” But unlike Kant, Remhof’s Nietzsche maintains that “concepts must apply to bundles of empirical properties.” The resulting account allows metaphysical concepts to refer, as “the application conditions of our concepts constitute the identity conditions of the objects that our concepts refer to” (p. 39), and *without* appealing to the kinds of non-empirical realms that Nietzsche criticizes under the heading of “two-world metaphysics.”

I am not convinced that the Constructivist Argument skirts Nietzsche’s indictment of two-world metaphysics, however. To motivate the point, consider Nietzsche’s ridicule of scientifically minded atheists who think that renouncing God’s existence suffices to break with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Such atheists delude themselves, Nietzsche claims, because their disavowal of God is motivated by a commitment to the unconditional value of truth, which forms the normative core of the Judeo-Christian tradition (*GS* 344). The scientific pursuit of disinterested objectivity “expresses asceticism of virtue as forcefully as does any negation of sensuality,” Nietzsche writes, because what “*compels*” this pursuit is an “unconditional will to truth, is the *belief in the ascetic ideal itself*, even if as [an] unconscious imperative, [...] is the belief in a *metaphysical value*, a value *in itself of truth*” (*GM* III:24; see also *GM* III:25).⁸ Revising one’s ontological commitments is therefore insufficient for avoiding what Nietzsche deems objectionable in the Judeo-Christian paradigm. One’s values and motivations also matter.

Nietzsche adopts a similar tactic toward metaphysicians, tracing their beliefs to underlying values and psychological impulses. “To explain how the strangest metaphysical claims of a philosopher really come about,” he advises, “it always good (and wise) to begin by asking: what morality is it (is he—) getting at?” He then analyzes such moral commitments in psychological terms, writing: “his morals bear decided and decisive witness to *who he is*—which means what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand with respect to each other” (*BGE* 6). Here as elsewhere, Nietzsche takes up metaphysical questions and answers not on their own terms, but as *symptoms* of underlying conditions that he considers problematic (*HH* I:16–17, 21; *GS* P:2, 151, 347; *BGE* 12, 14, 61; *GM* I:13; *TI* “Errors;” WLN

⁷ Whether Remhof’s use of “metaphysics” satisfies this causal constraint is unclear. To my knowledge, the term “metaphysics” derives from Aristotle, who defines the discipline as the study of unchanging substances (Aristotle 1984, “Metaphysics” Book Z). Yet Remhof insists that metaphysics need not do this.

⁸ Remhof takes these passages to criticize *mind-independent* understandings of truth (2018, pp. 99–101). I disagree. The pertinent passages do not contrast different conceptualizations of truth. Instead, they explicitly focus on the “unconditional will to truth” (*GS* 344), on “those who are unconditional on one point,” on “a value *in itself* of truth” (*GM* III:24), and “on the same overestimation of truth (more correctly: on the same belief in the *inaccessibility*, the *uncriticizability* of truth)” (*GM* III:25). Nietzsche does not target a particular *understanding* of truth, but a way of *valuing* truth, however it is understood.

pp. 141–42, 153). It is no coincidence that when mocking atheists for mistakenly believing themselves free from the Judeo-Christian paradigm, Nietzsche interrogates “anti-metaphysicians” (viz., those who reject two-world metaphysics) in the same breath (*GS* 344; *GM* III:24). Like their atheist counterparts, “one-world” metaphysicians can remain committed to the unconditional value of truth and a reciprocal devaluation of the world of “appearances.” Nietzsche considers this evaluative orientation suggestive of something still-more fundamental. He attributes the *need* for metaphysics to “that impetuous *demand for certainty* [...] the demand that one *wants* by all means something to be firm [...] the demand for foothold, support—in short, the *instinct of weakness*” (*GS* 347; see also *GS* P:2). Nietzsche’s censure of two-world metaphysics thus targets more than the positing of non-empirical, ontological domains. He also criticizes the values and instincts that motivate two-world metaphysics by leading individuals to consider the “apparent” world somehow unbearable, or at least somehow wanting.

Remhof is alive to this aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy. He notes that “for Nietzsche, the ‘metaphysical need’ most basically signals the need for *something permanent*, that is, something that persists either without change or through change,” before suggesting that a strictly immanent metaphysics, on which “all existents are impermanent,” does not voice this need (2023, p. 102). While constructivism may be less vulnerable to Nietzsche’s rebuke of two-world metaphysics than views that explicitly posit some unchanging, non-empirical realm, I doubt that it easily avoids Nietzsche’s scorn *in toto*. The evaluative orientation that Nietzsche criticizes can operate *within* an immanent metaphysics: one only needs to value truth above all “appearances” within the empirical world. Constructivism does this by insisting that all objects are *really* constructed, whereas their mind-independent unity is *merely* apparent. A demand for certainty can also underwrite constructivism. Even if all concepts, and thus objects, are constructed and revisable, constructivism *itself* purports to be an unchanging truth: the constructivist framework persists beneath all conceptual revision. Just as denying God’s existence is insufficient to break from the Judeo-Christian paradigm, on Nietzsche’s view, denying the existence of non-empirical realms is insufficient to evade the problems of two-world metaphysics.⁹ These problems extend beyond one’s ontological commitments into their underlying evaluative and psychological motivations.¹⁰

⁹ Simon May makes a parallel point when analyzing Nietzschean life-affirmation. He writes: “the pose of assuming that ‘life’ [...] can be evaluated and justified is the pose of the life-denier, *even if* he should end up giving it a positive value” (May 2011: 87). Analogously, I suggest that Nietzsche aspires to overcome *the need* for metaphysics. Those who take up metaphysical questions remain vulnerable to his indictment of this need, *even if* they offer immanent answers to these questions.

¹⁰ The foregoing concerns cannot be dismissed on the basis of the values and motivations that constructivists consciously espouse, as Nietzsche denies that individuals are typically aware of their actual values and motivations (*GS* 335, 345, 360; *BGE* 6, 32, 268; *GM* P:1). This opens the possibility that Nietzsche is deceived about the motivations behind *his* metaphysical conjectures. But non-metaphysical readers would presumably jettison such conjectures before abandoning Nietzsche’s analysis of life-denying values and impulses.

3 Psychology as queen of the sciences

I raised two worries about Remhof's defense of the Metaphysical Reading. First, I argued that the Meta-Metaphysical Argument fails to demarcate metaphysics as a distinct domain of inquiry because its criteria do not collectively establish what degrees and types of sensitivity to and interest in the questions "What exists?" and "What is the nature or structure of what exists?" suffice for metaphysics proper. Second, I argued that the position attributed to Nietzsche by the Constructivist Argument remains vulnerable to the portions of his criticisms of two-world metaphysics that concern the unconditional value of truth and the demand for certainty. I doubt that these are objections to which Remhof cannot reply. Besides, the Meta-Metaphysical and Constructivist Arguments do not stand or fall together (Remhof, 2023, p. 56)—and even if *both* arguments fell, Remhof offers further arguments about Nietzsche's adoption of methods (chap. 5) and subjects (chap. 6) that are metaphysical, broadly speaking. Still, I think the objections broached above allow non-metaphysical readers to resist Remhof's thesis, or so I will argue.

Recall that *Nietzsche as Metaphysician* seeks to avoid begging the question against Non-Metaphysical Readings by advancing the following argument: "If the Non-Metaphysical Reading is right, then for some reason, Nietzsche finds metaphysical philosophy distinctively problematic. [But] Nietzsche does not find metaphysical philosophy distinctively problematic. So, the Non-Metaphysical Reading is wrong" (p. 2). The foregoing discussion reveals how non-metaphysical readers can combat this argument.

The first premise of Remhof's *modus tollens* argument is that "If the Non-Metaphysical Reading is right, [...] Nietzsche finds metaphysical philosophy distinctively problematic." The preceding discussion of the Meta-Metaphysical Argument shows that this premise is false. Just as sociologists and linguists fall short of metaphysics proper *without* identifying distinctive problems with metaphysics, so can Nietzsche. The Non-Metaphysical Reading holds if Nietzsche is not interested in and sensitive to metaphysical questions *to the degree* or *in the manner* sufficient for metaphysics proper. If Nietzsche dabbles in metaphysical conjectures as part of a larger, non-metaphysical project that forms his real concern, or if his metaphysical conjectures are not intended to stand *independently* of his ethical and psychological aims, he might merely be *enmeshed* in metaphysics.

The second premise of Remhof's *modus tollens* argument is "Nietzsche does not find metaphysical philosophy distinctively problematic." The previous discussion of the Constructivist Argument challenges this premise. Non-metaphysical readers can argue that Nietzsche *does* raise distinctive problems with metaphysics—namely, that those interested in metaphysical questions value truth unconditionally and instinctively demand certainty. Remhof's restricted reading of Nietzsche's rebuke of two-world metaphysics as concerned solely with *ontology*

obscures how Nietzsche is also troubled by the *values* and *psychological impulses* that subtend two-world metaphysics. Such values and impulses can also motivate “one-world” metaphysical accounts.

Allow me to conclude with a general, methodological point. Nietzsche’s primary philosophical concern rests with *values*. He often analyzes such values by appealing to their adherent’s *psychology*. These claims are uncontroversial, as is Nietzsche adoption of this explanatory approach to metaphysical commitments. Reversing this order of priority by giving pride of place to metaphysical reflections that serve Nietzsche’s ethical and psychological ends, lets the tail wag the dog. This is more than a quibble about emphasis. Careful assessment of Nietzsche’s ethical and psychological aims is a prerequisite to determining whether he *actively engages* in *metaphysics proper*. Nietzsche’s ethical and psychological aims must also be clarified to ensure that whatever metaphysical position one attributes to him *serves*, rather than *impedes*, his goals. The objections raised here thus underscore the broadly Nietzschean lesson that attending to *motivations* is important when assessing a philosopher. Readers of Nietzsche should therefore resist Kant’s nostalgia for “a time when metaphysics was called the queen of all the sciences” (Kant, 1998, p. 99) and instead heed Nietzsche’s call that “psychology again be recognized as queen of the sciences” (*BGE* 23; see also *GM* I:17). Nietzsche’s relationship to metaphysics cannot be settled without first attending to the ethical and psychological dimensions of his thought.

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