

Metaphysics // Fall 2018

Handout 0

Introduction: Three metaphysics

POSSIBILITY OF METAPHYSICS. It is not clear whether the discipline we are going to examine this semester has anything to go for it. Metaphysics is supposed to address questions about existence, God, causation, properties, time, space, freedom. All of these are moreover to be addressed by reason and argument, not by experimentation or reliance on authority. Can this be done? Hofweber gives the examples of change and properties; let us give a couple more.

Example 1 (God). If the question is to be the existence of God, we should hope to establish it by reasoning. But there is a long tradition in philosophy, beginning at least with Hume and Kant, of seeing these arguments as unsuccessful. Modern versions of the teleological argument employ biological knowledge, and it is not clear how a philosopher can be best positioned to discuss these issues.

Example 2 (Time). One of the ancient metaphysical questions is the nature of time. But what is there left to debate if the nature of time has been addressed by physical theories?

THREE REACTIONS. Facing these doubts, a metaphysician can elect to follow two routes. One is to insist doing metaphysics the old way, ignore scientific findings, deem them irrelevant. This is *ambitious metaphysics*. (See Lowe's claims on change in Hofweber's selection.) Another is to surrender to sciences and restrict oneself to philosophical commentaries on scientific findings. In practice it can mean elucidating the assumptions made in particular areas of empirical research, clarifying the logical structure of scientific arguments. Or it can mean in essence parlaying scientific results into the solutions of the traditional philosophical problems. This is *unambitious metaphysics*.

Could there be a third route, the one of *modest metaphysics*? If there is any such route, it has to answer methodological questions of the domain of the metaphysical enquiry ('what are metaphysical questions about?') and of the epistemic tools the enquiry is conducted with ('what is the epistemic advantage of a metaphysician over a man on the street?').

OUR COURSE. We are not going to establish the viability of modest metaphysics. Instead, we will adopt as a methodological approach. Our selection contains many fragments from ambitious metaphysics (e.g., Prior, Lewis, McTaggart) and from unambitious metaphysics (e.g., Dawkins, Putnam). Yet most of them are *de facto* in the area of modest metaphysics (Quine should be a primary example). I say *de facto*, since hardly any of the authors draw the distinction explicitly or shows any interest in doing so. They are aware of the relevance of science and do not deny it. Many of them explicitly engage with the scientific research, and in some cases their philosophical discussion begins with the facts of that research (e.g., White).

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