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Metaphysics: 5 Questions

1. Why were you initially drawn to metaphysics (and what keeps you interested)?

In mid-career, I was inexorably drawn to metaphysics by questions that arise in the philosophy of mind. Beliefs, it seems to me, are not entities in the head; they are not entities at all. ‘Belief’ is just a nominalization of ‘believes’. Beliefs (and other attitudes) are properties of persons—whole persons. This view immediately raises the question: What are persons? With that question, I was launched into metaphysics.

Some of the most brilliant and most thoughtful philosophers I know are in metaphysics, and they say some very peculiar things—that chairs don’t exist, or even that you and I don’t exist. Or that the apparent variety of things in the world is really only a variety of concepts of things that are fundamentally alike. We apply different concepts to, say, walnuts and screwdrivers, but in reality they are both sums of temporal parts. I could go on.

The brilliant metaphysicians have tended not to take an ontological interest in the objects that we interact with in everyday life. To treat ordinary objects with ontological seriousness is to be willing to consider them in basic ontology: on standard views, roses, persons, and electron microscopes do not belong in basic ontology. Rather, such things may be treated linguistically. Many metaphysicians are willing to say that sentences like ‘The roses are in bloom’ or ‘I have never seen an electron microscope’ are true. But, they contend, the truth of such sentences does not require that a full description of reality mention roses or electron microscopes. Alternatively, they may take medium-sized objects to be just sums of particles.

I found myself responding to what the brilliant metaphysicians said with what David Lewis (himself a brilliant metaphysician) called the ‘incredulous stare’. So, I wanted to toss another view into the arena, one that I could bring myself to believe. The differences between roses and electron microscopes are ontological: a rose is of a fundamentally different kind from an electron microscope, and both belong in any complete inventory of what exists. That is, an ontology that mentioned particles but not electron microscopes would be incomplete.

Yes, I agree that microphysical particles make up every particular object in the

natural world. But it does not follow that, ontologically speaking, medium-sized objects are reducible to microparticles, nor does it follow that the realm of ordinary medium-sized objects that we encounter and interact with is in any way inferior to the realm of microphysical particles. I set out to make sense of the idea that the world that we interact with is as real as the microparticles that make it up. But, then, how should ordinary objects—persons, artifacts, artworks—be understood if not as collections of atoms (or something similar)? That question grabbed me. I set out to give a metaphysical underpinning—as rigorous as those of other philosophers—to ordinary phenomena with which we are all familiar.

What keeps me interested in metaphysics is the profound satisfaction of getting clear (or trying to) about reality in terms that make our experience of it intelligible. Most of my efforts have been directed toward the world of everyday life—the world that we live and die in, the world that surprises or bores us, the world that we cannot get away from.

In short, I was drawn to metaphysics in a natural transition from the philosophy of mind. What I found in the brilliant metaphysicians made reality too thin. They had to go through contortions to connect what they considered real with the world familiar to all of us. So I set out to develop a unified view of the world that we all interact with, and to give a general account of its inhabitants.

2. What do you consider to be your most important contributions to metaphysics?

‘Contribution’ may be an overstatement. What I have tried to do has met with varying degrees of success. My aim in metaphysics has been to give an ontological account of things in the everyday world—people, organisms, artifacts, molecules—and of the ways that they are related to each other. The account is relentlessly nonreductive: each thing is constituted by things on lower levels, but is not reducible to, nor identical to, anything on a lower level. For example, a mallet is constituted by the sum of a wooden rod and a cylinder, which is constituted by sums of cellulose molecules, which is constituted by.... Or a particular salt molecule is constituted by the sum of a sodium atom and a chlorine atom, which in turn is constituted by a sum of subatomic particles.... Or a human person is constituted by a human animal, which is constituted by a sum of organs, which is constituted by a sum of cells....

But the mallet is neither identical to, nor reducible to, the sum of the rod and cylinder that constitute it. First, the identity of a constituted thing (like a mallet) may depend on relational properties, even intentional properties, but the identity of a sum depends only on the existence of its mereological parts. For example, something’s being an automobile depends not only on the relation of the engine, drive train, wheels, brakes etc. to each other; nothing is an automobile in the absence of economic practices, and beings with desires and intentions. Something that looked like a ’57 Chevy that spontaneously coalesced in outer

space would not be an automobile. It's not just that we wouldn't call it an 'automobile'. It would not *be* one.

One of the discoveries that this constitution view has led to is that constitution is not composition. Composition is cheap: any things have a mereological sum. A mereological sum is just a collection or aggregation of objects. Any aggregation, (e.g., my left eyeball and the *Mona Lisa*) has a sum, but sums are just that: sums. No sum is identical to any material object. A sum is ontologically redundant; given its proper parts, the sum automatically exists. Material objects are not ontologically redundant. So, material objects cannot be identical to mereological sums. But this raises the question: what is the relation between my desk and the physical particles that make it up at this time? Well, the physical particles that make up my desk now automatically have a mereological sum, and that sum constitutes my desk now. Constitution is the ontological glue between sums of particles and material objects.

The Constitution View allows that an object may be constituted by different things at different times; it may change its parts without going out of existence. Scratch my desk, and *it* (the very same desk) is constituted by a different sum of microphysical particles. Replace a light bulb and the lamp survives. The Constitution View also allows that the things we interact with—each other, our tools and natural environment—have as great ontological status as we do or as microphysical particles do.

One application of the Constitution View that I take to be a valuable contribution is its account of human persons. A human person (i.e., a human being) is constituted by a human organism. An organism is essentially biological, but not essentially first-personal; a person is essentially first-personal, but not essentially biological. (With advances in nanotechnology, you or I could come to be constituted by a body that is largely if not totally bionic.) When I say that a person is essentially first-personal, I mean that a person essentially has a first-person perspective—either rudimentary or robust. A robust first-person perspective is the ability to conceive of oneself in the first-person, without any name or description or other third-personal referring device.

I suspect that the development of a robust first-person perspective goes hand-in-hand with learning a natural language. If natural languages—with their subjunctive moods and pluperfect tenses—could be a product of natural selection, so could the ability to support robust first-person perspectives. And, on the Constitution View, with the ability to support first-person perspectives brought into being a new kind of entity—persons. A person has a first-person perspective nonderivatively; an organism that constitutes a persons has (the same) first-person perspective derivatively. To have a property derivatively is to have it in virtue of constituting or being constituted by something that has the property nonderivatively. I have spelled out this Constitution View of persons in great detail in *Persons and Bodies* (2000) and in *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*

(2007).

The reason that I think that this view of persons is a contribution is that—unlike substance dualism on the one hand and animalism on the other—the Constitution View satisfies two desiderata for a metaphysical view of persons. Persons are (1) wholly part of the natural world, and yet (2) ontologically unique. If substance dualism is correct, it is difficult to see how persons could be wholly part of the natural order; if animalism is correct, persons are not ontologically unique. Moreover, the Constitution View of persons is not ad hoc. It fits neatly into the more general metaphysical account of all material objects—water molecules, tigers, computers, space shuttles, sculptures and so on.

This picture of constitution allows for ontological novelty. Genuinely new kinds of things can come about by natural selection or by intentional effort. A world with organisms is ontologically different from a world without organisms, and a world with devices like iPhones is ontologically different from a world without them. So, another feature of my view that is outside mainstream metaphysics is that on this constitution view we human beings make an ontological contribution to reality by inventing new kinds of things. (Why shouldn't we? We're part of the natural world, after all.) So, although we can know something about ontology as of now and at times in the past, there will not be a complete ontology until the end of time.

The Constitution View is an example of what I call 'Practical Realism': *Practical* because I believe that the everyday world—that part of reality that includes us, our languages, and the things we interact with—is no less ontologically significant than microphysical parts of reality; *Realist* because I endorse everyday objects as belonging to basic ontology, and in addition, I believe that there may exist objects and properties beyond our ability to recognize them.

Let me mention one last feature that will seem to many a dubious contribution: quasi-naturalism. Practical Realism, and in particular the Constitution View of persons, is compatible with theism without entailing it. When I say that persons are wholly part of the natural world, I mean to endorse a kind of quasi-naturalism. The natural world is a spatiotemporal order that has its own integrity and autonomy. The sciences are sovereign in their domains, and they are silent about matters outside their domains. Regularities and processes in the natural world have naturalistic explanations—that is, explanations that make no appeal to any supernatural beings.

Nevertheless, quasi-naturalism falls short of full-blown naturalism in two respects—one epistemological and the other metaphysical. First, quasi-naturalism does not claim that the sciences are the only source of knowledge; rather it allows that there are kinds of knowledge—e.g., ordinary empirical experience, humanistic studies of history—that are invisible to the sciences. A second way that quasi-

naturalism falls short of full-blown naturalism is that quasi-naturalism is not a metaphysical thesis at all. It does not claim that the natural world is all there is to reality; it remains neutral about whether or not the natural world exhausts reality. If the natural world is all there is, then microparticles make up every concrete object that exists. Quasi-naturalism does not settle this question.

I must admit that this picture that I have promoted has not found universal acceptance, to say the least. What I can say for it is only this: The picture is one that I can take seriously as a picture of the ways things really are. I venture to say that it fits our experience of what we encounter and interact with. We do not have to leave it behind when we exit the seminar room.

3. What do you think is the proper role of metaphysics in relation to other areas of philosophy and other academic disciplines, including the natural sciences?

I am admittedly old-fashioned. With respect to other areas of philosophy, I confess that I take metaphysics to be fundamental. Ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of language raise questions in metaphysics; the most interesting (to me) questions in philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, action theory, and philosophy of art are metaphysical.

With respect to the sciences, metaphysics is neither an extension of the sciences nor is it an a priori foundation of the sciences. Although metaphysicians should respect the established results of the sciences (e.g., Darwinism), they should not be constrained by philosophical interpretations that scientists put on their work—such as making theological claims exclusively on the basis of natural selection.

While respecting the knowledge yielded by the social and natural sciences, I repudiate ‘scientism’. Scientism can take many forms. Ontologically, it is the view that the only genuine entities are those needed for scientific explanation; methodologically, it is the view that all genuine knowledge is validated by the methods of science; semantically, it is the view that the only respectable concepts are those used in the sciences. I think that to yield to scientism—ontologically, methodologically or semantically—would issue in a narrowing and a coarsening of human inquiry.

Metaphysics has a place along side of science. For example, physics has no need of (or place for) an ongoing ‘now’, but a moving present is at the heart of human experience; indeed, a moving present is constitutive of self-conscious awareness. What should we say? We should not simply ignore physics or require a convoluted route to physics from an A-theory of time that postulates an ongoing present; nor should we ignore common experience by endorsing an exclusively B-theory of time that denies the reality of a moving ‘now’. Rather, we should show how we human persons contribute the ongoing ‘now’ to reality; the ongoing ‘now’ emerges along with us. Metaphysics generally should furnish accounts that are adequate both to the sciences and to human experience.

In the end, I take a moderate view: science has been a powerful engine of knowledge, but not the only source of knowledge: narrative history, the arts, ordinary experience, and even metaphysics are also valuable sources of knowledge.

The ideal metaphysician would be a well-educated intellectual, knowledgeable about the social and natural sciences, history, literature and art. But metaphysics is different from these other disciplines; it asks different sorts of questions (e.g., about the nature of causation rather than what causes what) and uses different sorts of methods (e.g., extravagant thought experiments that challenge the limits of the imagination). Although the questions that metaphysics asks are not empirical questions, the answers should be informed by empirical results of the natural and social sciences and of common experience. So, in my opinion, metaphysics can be done from an armchair with internet access.

4. What do you consider the proper method for metaphysics?

Metaphysics, along with philosophy generally, proceeds by argument. It begins with a description of the ways that things seem to be and gives reasons for (or grounds of or causes of) their seeming as they do. The ways things seem are explananda, and metaphysics as an account of the way things really are furnishes explanans. Metaphysics rarely replaces explananda, but typically shows why they have the features that they have. Or this, I believe, is traditionally how metaphysics has proceeded from Aristotle (and to some extent Plato) on.

If this Aristotelian picture is at all on the right track, then much contemporary analytic metaphysics is off course. First, analytic metaphysicians do not use metaphysics to understand the ways things seem; rather they try to reveal an underlying reality with which to replace appearances. Second, to the extent that metaphysicians treat what everyone takes for granted at all, it is only to explain how we can say true (or almost true!) things about, say, refrigerators or birth certificates—in light of the presumption that a complete inventory of everything that exists does not mention such manifest objects.

I prefer the Aristotelian approach to the metaphysical procedures prevalent today. However, the Aristotelian approach is somewhat bare as a method. I do not believe that, in a more fine-grained way, there is a single proper method for metaphysics. I think that we have to be eclectic. It may be useful to recall the old positivist distinction between discovery and justification.

For discovery, we begin with (relatively) pre-theoretical data gleaned from common experience, the sciences, our interactions with each other and the manifest objects around us, our successful cognitive practices. We reflect on those data using whatever methods come to hand: a priori reasoning, thought-

experiments, reflection on empirical results of the sciences, reflection on ordinary experience, even questionnaires (gulp!), whatever. Beginning with the way things seem and with the ways that we interact with them, we can fashion the premises for a metaphysical conclusion out of any of these. Along the way, we may winnow out or reconstruct some of the data as we reach for reflective equilibrium. But the goal is to shed light on the (relatively) pre-theoretical data.

Justification proceeds from the goal of metaphysics: to give comprehensive accounts of basic features of reality that make our experience intelligible. If a task of metaphysics is to explain our experience and to ground the rationality of our practices and attitudes towards things, we can assess a metaphysical view by how well it accomplishes this task.

Our experience importantly includes our practices and attitudes toward the manifest objects that we interact with. For example, suppose that I buy a new sofa, but I find that it is too large. So, I return it. To get a refund, I must return *it*—the very same sofa. The sofa that I bought persisted through, e.g., loss of some of its atoms in transit. Our practices of buying and returning (and much else—think of property rights and tort law) require us to re-identify manifest objects over time. If the manifest objects were not stable over time, our practices would be unintelligible. The metaphysical point is that the manifest objects that we re-identify really are the very same objects over time (unlike underlying sums of particles that may make them up over time). Holding that manifest objects are really just successive sums of particles puts our everyday attitudes and practices concerning them at risk of irrationality.

So, I propose a kind of reversal of the priorities of contemporary metaphysics. Rather than beginning with a priori deliverances of reason, and assessing the extent to which common beliefs measure up, I advise beginning with the world as we encounter it and judge metaphysical systems by the extent to which they illuminate it. Even those who, like David Lewis and Roderick Chisholm, take ordinary beliefs as data for ontology depict reality as something unrecognizable to the sciences and to common sense (and unrecognizable to me).

In contrast to the assumptions of the Cartesian project, all philosophizing, I believe, has substantive presuppositions. For example, I am an externalist about meaning: our knowledge of meanings cannot be distilled from our knowledge of the world. To have a language is to have many beliefs about the world. The world is linguistically infected, and language is world-infected: we cannot peel language off the world and consider either in isolation from the other. We have no choice but to begin in the middle of things—with everyday observations, which have proved to be quite reliable.

What is distinctive about metaphysics is not a method but a goal: to give comprehensive accounts of basic features of reality. And the basic features of reality, I have argued, include manifest objects. So, I think that philosophy is a

tool, not a body of doctrine to which we owe allegiance. The view that I have labeled ‘Practical Realism’ is a way to practice a metaphysics that answers to questions that reflective people might have outside the seminar room.

5. What do you consider to be the most neglected topics in contemporary metaphysics, and what direction would you like metaphysics to take in the future?

A glaring neglect is how to assess metaphysical theories. On what basis should one be preferred over another? Metaphysicians (I’m guilty here too) are too oracular. Aside from its internal features like coherence and elegance, a metaphysical theory is tested by its consequences. (I take this to be a Peircean idea.) To what extent does the metaphysical view provide comprehensive illumination of the world that we interact with? How well does it shed light on matters that people can care about outside the seminar room? Reality as we interact with it is strange enough; metaphysics should not increase its strangeness.

I would like to see metaphysics turn from fantasized reality (“Suppose we had a complete psychological theory T,...”) to reality that we actually know about and live in. Metaphysics should show how things that everyone cares about—objects like your house keys or Michelangelo’s *David*, and states of affairs like having loving relationships or being employed—fit into basic reality.

If metaphysicians made a turn toward understanding things that matter, they might be more likely to be nonreductivists about ordinary objects. They might see relational and intentional properties (about which we know a great deal) as being as significant as microphysical properties (about which we know next to nothing).

And finally, they might come to see the emptiness of the distinction between what is mind-independent and what is mind-dependent. The sun contributes to reality (mind-independently) by bringing plants into existence. We human beings likewise contribute to reality by bring artifacts into existence. What we bring into existence partly by means of our intentions is just as real as what the sun brings into existence partly by means of its streams of photons.

In contrast to the brilliant metaphysicians, I do not think that what really matters should be relegated to a matter of semantics: It is not enough to have sentences turn out true when paraphrased in unfamiliar ways. Nor is it helpful to appeal to the distribution of microscopic qualities over spacetime: We know much less about the distribution of microscopic qualities over spacetime than we do about tables and chairs and dinner parties.

Metaphysicians would do well to respect what they knew before starting philosophy. As Peirce put it, “Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we

do not doubt in our hearts.”