

# THE UNAVOIDABILITY OF METAPHYSICS

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# How to define metaphysics?

Numerous answers have been offered:

- 1) negative definition (what metaphysics is not),
- 2) etymological definition,
- 3) a discipline which should offer us a conceptual analysis of terms like existence, causation, substance, space, etc,
- 4) definition by example approach
- 5) the big picture approach:
  - “Metaphysics is the study of ultimate reality.” (van Inwagen 2015, 1)
  - “The branch of philosophy concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of reality.” (Carroll, Markosian 2010: 2)
  - “A systematic study of the most fundamental structure of reality” (Lowe 2002)

# The big picture approach

- “Metaphysics is the study of ultimate reality.” (van Inwagen 2015, 1)
- “The branch of philosophy concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of reality.” (Carroll, Markosian 2010: 2)
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## What is postulated within these definitions?

- The existence of a reality,
- The irreducibility of metaphysics,
- The universality of its subject matter and scope,
- A theoretical backdrop for other disciplines,
- A measure for consistency.
- The unavoidability and ineliminability of metaphysics?

# The big picture approach

Why should a big picture approach be endorsed?

Because of the need of a forum for boundary disputes:

“...one of the roles of metaphysics, as an intellectual discipline, is to provide a forum in which boundary disputes between other disciplines can be conducted - for instance, the dispute as to whether the subject-matter of a special science, such as biology or psychology or economics, can properly be said to be subsumed under that of another, allegedly more 'fundamental' science, such as physics. (...) metaphysics can occupy the interdisciplinary role just described because its central concern is with *the fundamental structure of reality as a whole*. (Lowe 2002: 2-3)

# A forum for boundary disputes

- “Metaphysics, as traditionally conceived, is very arguably ineliminable and conceptually necessary as the intellectual backdrop for every other discipline. Why? Ultimately, because truth is single and indivisible or, to put it another way, the world or reality as a whole is unitary and necessarily self-consistent.” (...)
- “...the indivisibility of truth means that all of these forms of inquiry [history for example] must, if they are to succeed in their aim, acknowledge the need to be consistent with each other.” (...)
- “[consistency] can only be provided by the practitioners of an intellectual discipline which aspires to complete universality in its subject-matter and aims - and that discipline is metaphysics, as traditionally conceived.” (Lowe 2002: 3)

# The problem of boundary disputes

Lowe's argument rests on the idea that boundary disputes between different disciplines cannot be resolved from a standpoint of a particular discipline.

Why?

- All particular disciplines are pursuing truth using their own specific truth-seeking methods and because of that these disciplines may not act as a guarantee of mutual consistency.

Therefore, to measure mutual consistency a universal truth-checking arena is needed.

- Mutual consistency can be guaranteed only by a discipline which presupposes a universal subject matter: the indivisibility of truth.

Which discipline can provide such an arena? Metaphysics!

# The indispensability of metaphysics

An argument for the indispensability of metaphysics.

1. To resolve boundary disputes between different disciplines a forum that provides mutual consistency is needed.
2. Mutual consistency can be achieved only within a forum that aspires to complete universality in its subject-matter and aims.
3. Metaphysics presents itself as such a forum.
4. Therefore, metaphysics is indispensable (for the resolution of boundary disputes).

# Questioning metaphysics role

Are we justified in accepting Lowe's suggestion?

Numerous attempts that put in doubt the idea that metaphysics can assume such a role have been put forward. However, according to Lowe these attempts only

“strengthen the claims of metaphysics to be an autonomous and indispensable form of rational inquiry: because the point is that absolutely *everything*, including even the status and credentials of metaphysics itself, comes within the purview of the universal discipline which metaphysics claims to be.” (Lowe 2002: 3)



# The threat of relativism

Cultural, anthropologic, historical or scientific relativism:

- Denies the thesis of a single and indivisible truth while maintaining the idea that what is true for one culture or historical epoch may not be true for another, and that different cultures and epochs have different and incommensurable conceptions of reason and rationality.

“Metaphysics is *not* possible, because metaphysics is the misbegotten product of western intellectual hubris, the mistaken search for a non-existent ‘objective’ and ‘total’ truth, guided by supposedly timeless and universal principles of logic. Truth and reason, according to this view, are culture-bound concepts of strictly limited utility. The notion that there could be a ‘fundamental structure of reality’ for us to discern is deemed absurd and paradoxical, because what we call ‘reality’ is (supposedly) always just some human construction saturated by interest-driven interpretation.” (Lowe 2001: 3)

# Lowe's reply to the threat of relativism

The threat of relativism is a metaphysical thesis

- “But, of course, such a doctrine is itself a metaphysical thesis, in the sense of 'metaphysics' that I have been expounding and trying to defend: for it is nothing less than a claim about the fundamental nature of reality, which could not be substantiated solely by the methods of any special science or intellectual discipline, such as anthropology or history or sociology. (...) The practitioners of any such discipline (...) must acknowledge that what they are advocating is precisely a metaphysical thesis, because it is one which transcends the boundaries of any more limited form of rational inquiry.” (Lowe 2002: 4)

# Lowe's reply to the threat of relativism

The threat of relativism is self-defeating:

- “The attempt to undermine or eliminate the metaphysical dimension of our thinking is self-defeating, because the very attempt necessarily constitutes a piece of metaphysical thinking itself.”  
(Lowe 2002: 4)

# Kant: how is metaphysics possible?

Kant:

- Metaphysical claims concern not the fundamental structure of a mind independent reality, even if such a reality exists, but rather the fundamental structure of rational *thought* about reality. Therefore, a metaphysics that would deal with the fundamental structure of reality is impossible.

# Two replies to Kant

## First argument against Kant

- “If nothing about the structure of mind independent reality is accessible to us then, by the same token, nothing about the structure of our own thought is accessible to us either.” (Lowe 2002: 7)
- Lowe is offering a critique of the content of Kant’s theory.

# Kant's threat is self-defeating

Second argument vs. Kant:

First step: putting emphasis on the form, on the metaphysical dimension of Kant's argument:

- “Once again we see how metaphysics, as traditionally conceived, is inescapable for any rational thinker. The Kantian attempt to avoid metaphysics in this sense by restricting our critical concerns purely to the contents of our thoughts appears doomed to failure. Questions to do with content themselves have, inescapably, a genuinely metaphysical dimension, that is, a dimension which does not have solely to do with the content of thoughts about content.” (Lowe 2002: 7-8)

Second step: showing the self-defeating dimension of Kant's threat:

- “Notice here, first of all, that the very assertion that it would not be *possible* to have certain knowledge of metaphysical truths if metaphysical truths concerned mind-independent reality is itself a *metaphysical* claim, in the traditional sense of 'metaphysics' (...) This in itself shows, once more, the self-defeating nature of Kant's attempted redefinition.” (Lowe 2002: 9)

# Lowe's replies to criticisms of metaphysics

The threat of relativism is self-defeating.

Kant's threat is self-defeating.

The threat of naturalized epistemology rests on metaphysical assumptions and therefore it is self-defeating:

- “It has to be recognized that the very debate that I am now conducting with the advocate of naturalized epistemology is one which itself necessarily rests upon certain metaphysical assumptions - some of which are shared and some of which are disputed. In short the very doctrine of naturalized epistemology, and the kinds of arguments that are invoked in its support, have a metaphysical dimension to them which is at odds with the central claims of that doctrine.” (Lowe 2002: 6-7)

# How to eliminate metaphysics?

Lowe`s argumentation suggests that the arguments which suggest that we should eliminate metaphysics ultimately do the opposite: they end up strengthening our belief in it and render it ineliminable. How so?

Because critiques of metaphysics are themselves metaphysical assertions involving metaphysical content. They offer metaphysical claims, theories, assumptions, assertions or have a metaphysical dimension.

To eliminate metaphysics, one should offer an argument whose content isn't metaphysical. But that is impossible.



# The ineliminability of metaphysics

An argument for the ineliminability of metaphysics.

1. To eliminate metaphysics, one should offer an argument whose content isn't metaphysical.
2. But any argument that criticizes metaphysics presents itself as having a metaphysical content.
3. Therefore, it is impossible offer an argument outside metaphysics' scope.
4. Therefore, it is impossible to eliminate metaphysics.
5. Metaphysics is ineliminable.

# The role of the fundamental structure of reality

What is the role of the fundamental structure of reality when defending metaphysics from its critics?

The argumentation against the threat of relativism does not rely on it.

“This [the attempt to eliminate metaphysics] shows that the argument from the indivisibility of truth is not absolutely essential to the defence of metaphysics, in the sense that metaphysics would be left completely without justification in its absence: which, once again, should not surprise us, because everything, including even the question of whether truth is indivisible, is potentially open to metaphysical inquiry.” (Lowe 2002: 4-5)

However, it seems that the fundamental structure of reality does play a role in the argument of metaphysics ineliminability.

# The role of the fundamental structure of reality

The importance of the fundamental structure of reality:

1. The indispensability of metaphysics argument is grounded on it.
2. The criticisms are revolving around it.

The fundamental structure of reality (the indivisibility of truth) is important because this is the content of what we are arguing about while practicing metaphysics.

- Without a positive formulation, or an attempt at a formulation, or without a possibility of its formulation criticisms of it would be unviable.

The role of the criticisms:

- The criticisms have a curious function in Lowe's argumentation as they lead us to the conclusion that metaphysics is ineliminable.

# Indispensability, ineliminability and unavoidability of metaphysics

The final result of Lowe's reasoning is the thesis of the indispensability, ineliminability and unavoidability of metaphysics:

- Metaphysics is immune to rejection and presents itself as an intellectual prerequisite for natural sciences and any other discipline. It does not have a restricted domain as natural sciences do as it explores not only what is actual, but it is also interested in anything that might be possible as well. Furthermore, as all other disciplines rest upon some metaphysical presuppositions, all boundary disputes between these disciplines will have a metaphysical dimension and therefore metaphysics may be regarded as an indispensable forum within which these disputes take place.

Hence, metaphysics by aspiring to complete universality in its subject matter and aims presents itself as indispensable, ineliminable and unavoidable.

# Is that all? A problem with Carnap

It seems that a Carnap's critique of metaphysics might not be affected by Lowe's argumentation.

It seems that all the work in Lowe's argumentation is being done not by affirming that one line of reasoning is self-defeating but rather by claiming that what is being said is a metaphysical assertion.

In order to reject Lowe's argumentation, it is essential to establish that the criticism put against metaphysics does not involve a metaphysical assertion. It seems that Carnap is offering such an argument.

# Carnap's criticisms of metaphysics

## Linguistic framework

- A list of expressions for the language and syntactic rules.
- Rules that allow us to evaluate whether, or not a given sentence in the language is true or false.
- Internal / external questions and statements

Can ontological questions be meaningful? They are either trivially true or meaningless.

# A hasty reply to Carnap's criticism

Carnap's threat is self-defeating:

- Carnap's thesis that no assertion may be formulated outside of a linguistic framework is in itself an assertion, to be more precise a metaphysical assertion. Therefore, what was said against the threat of relativism may be applied to Carnap's threat as well:
  - “The attempt to undermine or eliminate the metaphysical dimension of our thinking is self-defeating, because the very attempt necessarily constitutes a piece of metaphysical thinking itself.”  
(Lowe 2002: 4)

# Defending Carnap

Carnap`s linguistic frame thesis does not represent a metaphysical assertion but rather a semantic interpretation - “my semantic method” (Carnap 1950).

According to Carnap the process of choosing a linguistic framework does not revolve around matters of fact. The choice is guided by pragmatic reasons.

- “An alleged statement of the reality of [a] system of entities is a pseudostatement without cognitive content. To be sure, we have to face at this point an important question, but it is a practical, not a theoretical question; it is a question of whether or not to accept the new linguistic forms. The acceptance cannot be judged as being either true or false because it is not an assertion.” (Carnap 1950, p. 214)



# How to criticize Carnap's position

If we are not talking about an assertion than argument for the ineliminability of metaphysics fails.

We could criticize Carnap in various, standard manners by focusing on the content of Carnap's argumentation:

- Quine: Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions tacitly relies on the analytic / synthetic distinction.
- Haack: the thesis of reality may be formulated in some other (meta) language M.
- Devitt – Sterelny: Because of „the given” positivists are closet anti-realists who offer an *a priori* theory of language.
- Lowe: the objection offered against Kant may be raised against the semantic conception of metaphysics.

Or, perhaps, another attempt can be formulated in the spirit of the indispensability/ineliminability argumentation.

# Science as activity, science as product

- “The word ‘science’ displays a typical ambiguity between activity and product. We say that science tells us that smoking is unhealthy: this refers to the product - findings, well-confirmed theories accepted in the scientific community. We also say that science investigates such structures as links between smoking and health or between background radiation and the history of the universe. Here we refer to the activity in which scientists are engaged” (van Fraassen 2002, 155).

## Could we claim the same thing for metaphysics?

- The term ‘metaphysics’ shares an ambiguity with the term ‘science’. ‘Metaphysics’ refers to both the activity conducted by the metaphysicist and the product of this activity. (Jaksland 2016: 12-13)

# Metaphysics as activity, metaphysics as product

What do we intend by metaphysical product?

- Metaphysical theories about the fundamental structure of reality. The content of such product is debatable, avoidable, contingent.

It seems that Lowe thinks the same when talking about the relation between possibility and experience:

- “I hold that metaphysics by itself only tells us what there could be. But given that metaphysics has told us this, experience can then tell us which of various alternative metaphysical possibilities is plausibly true in actuality.” (Lowe 2001: 9)

What do we intend by metaphysical activity?

- Metaphysical investigation, inquiry, formulations of criticisms, the showing of structures.

# Revisiting the ineliminability argument in the light of the product / activity distinction

## The ineliminability argument

1. To eliminate metaphysics, one should offer an argument whose content isn't metaphysical.
2. But any argument that criticizes metaphysics presents itself as having a metaphysical content.
3. Therefore, it is impossible offer an argument outside metaphysics' scope.
4. Therefore, it is impossible to eliminate metaphysics.
5. Metaphysics is ineliminable.

## A different formulation of the ineliminability argument:

1. To eliminate metaphysics, one should offer an argument that does not involve metaphysical activity.
2. But any argument that criticizes metaphysics presents itself as involving metaphysical activity.
3. Therefore, it is impossible to offer an argument that does not present itself as a metaphysical activity.
4. Therefore, it is impossible to eliminate metaphysics.
5. Metaphysics is ineliminable.

# Refuting Carnap

## Refuting Carnap:

- According to Carnap metaphysics should be eliminated since statements about reality cannot be made as they end up being pseudostatements.
- Carnap's argument is not a metaphysical assertion, it is offered as a semantical generalization (a guideline on how language should be used?).
- Semantical generalizations may lack metaphysical content, but they do present themselves as a form of metaphysical activity.
- If that is true, then Carnap's argument may be refuted using the revised ineliminability argument.

# Metaphysics as activity is a brute fact

One might say that such an argument is uninformative, shallow and perhaps even circular as metaphysics is being justified, or to be more precise, defended by appealing to metaphysics. Therefore, we should reject it!

Or perhaps we could say something entirely different:

- All that has been said is correct but this is so because there is nothing else to be said. We are dealing with something fundamental. We are dealing with a brute fact.

Nota bene: metaphysical activity is not about the content of reality or the content of metaphysical claims, it is about the act of showing, scrutinizing, assuming, criticizing. We cannot further investigate, analyze the fact that a specific act is metaphysical. Simply there is nothing more to be said.

# Should we adopt such a distinction?

Why should we adopt such a division?

- It seems that we engage in metaphysical activity on daily bases:
  - “Precisely because metaphysics is a universal intellectual discipline, it is one which no rational being can avoid engaging in at least some of the time. We are all metaphysicians whether we like it or not, and whether we know it or not.” (Lowe 1998: 4)
- To gain a better grasp of some metaphysical systems that rely on the notion of showing without accepting the idea of their meaninglessness (Wittgenstein’s ladder).
- To better understand and ultimately reject Carnap’s criticism and any other future possible criticism.
- It seem that there is a difference between the two: metaphysics as product is debatable and eliminable, but metaphysics as activity is not.
- It seems that metaphysics is not impossible.

# Is metaphysics impossible?

The impossibility of metaphysics:

- There would be no reason to ask how metaphysics is possible if we did not suspect that metaphysics might be impossible. (Jaksland 2016: 2)

The indispensability/ineliminability argumentation brings us to a contrary conclusion: metaphysics is indispensable, ineliminable and unavoidable.

What does the expression 'metaphysics is impossible' mean?

I'm inclined to think that the very idea of metaphysics being impossible is a very dubious one, if not even an impossible one.



# The possibility of metaphysics

It seems that it is impossible for metaphysics to be impossible:

- can we even grasp what we mean when we say that metaphysics is impossible?
  - The very act of grasping would be about a metaphysical something, it would involve some kind metaphysical activity.
- Does that mean that there is no reality, that it is impossible?
  - Even an imagined impossibility of reality would be one possibility of how reality can be.
- Does that mean that there are no entities that metaphysics deals with?
  - Even an empty universe/reality is a universe/reality.
- The very act of imagining the impossibility of metaphysics is an act of metaphysical thinking/imagining.

# The unavoidability of metaphysics

This argumentation might seem uninteresting and vacuous but in my opinion it depicts an important aspect of metaphysics and its unavoidability; even if we can't confirm its existence, specify it, elucidate it, fight off the counterarguments that are offered against our positive illustrations of what metaphysics might be we are still doing it, practicing it.

Furthermore, it seems that we cannot even think, speak, argue without venturing into the metaphysical domain. Therefore, metaphysics cannot be impossible, it is impossible for it to be impossible, it is indispensable, ineliminable and unavoidable!

Thank you!