

Metaphysics between Redundancy and Esoterics

Christina Schneider

University of Munich
christin@stat.uni-muenchen.de

I can't wait for the first metaphysician to come out and defend that everything is water. Not to be confused with *aquaism*: the view that everything is water. That is clearly false. Rather, it's *priority aquaism*: everything is ultimately water. Water is the most fundamental of all things. Of course, water is H_2O , and so made up from other stuff, but that is the wrong sense of priority. Water is metaphysically more basic than both *H* and *O*, though physically *H* and *O* might well be more basic. Our ontology contains only water. It nicely goes with a process metaphysics. It supports our intuitive judgement that water is an especially important liquid. It is perfectly understandable: I mean it in Thales' sense! Maybe it even gives rise to the final explanation why time flows. And the next one will defend *priority aeroism*: the view that everything is ultimately air. (The final explanation of why time flies!) A new golden era, or the dark ages all over again. (Hofweber, 2009, pp. 273–74)

This is a harsh and provocative critique. **Yet** even as a polemic, it expresses some attempt to say something about “the world” – crude as it may be.

Another stance to “the world“ is pointed at in a 2006 paper of K. Mulligan, P. Simons and B. Smith titled “What's wrong with Contemporary Philosophy?” The authors summarize the attitude of contemporary philosophers/metaphysicians/ontologists as they came to see it as follows:

[...], it [philosophy, metaphysics, ontology, C.S.] is cultivated with every appearance of theoretical rigour. [...], its participants do not, by and large, believe that philosophy is or can be a science, i.e., they do not believe that it can add to the stock of positive human knowledge. (Mulligan/Simons/Smith, 2006, p. 64)

Not believing that “philosophy is or can be a science, [...]” expresses what the authors call *horror mundi*. **For those suffering from this *horror mundi***, metaphysics degenerates to being both superfluous and esoteric in character, somehow backed up by some formal tools, some sophistication in arguing “thought experiments” (the notorious Mary and the notorious zombies may be a case in point). But, in the end, it is an endeavor irrelevant for scientific as well as practical purposes and – even under the perspective from within – not devoid of triviality.

Whatever its theoretical status may be, metaphysics is not an empirical science. Concerning the *horror mundi*, it may be asked whether, after all, this is not the right attitude. Isn't it the case that metaphysics, once the most important part of philosophy, has lost its scope, has been made superfluous by "scientific progress"? Is it not the case that the empirical sciences are much better at saying "what there is", how it is, and how all that is fits together?¹

If this should be the case, is there anything left for metaphysics beyond constructing parallel universes, endowed with "metaphysical water" on the one hand and playful armchairing on the other? Are there alternatives that deserve – one way or another – the name "metaphysics"? Is metaphysics trapped between the *Scylla* of being superfluous and the *Charybdis* of being esoteric? May there be a way out?

If one takes the abovementioned stances towards contemporary metaphysics – exaggerated though they may be – seriously, one may ask, among other things, whether there is a common reason for the theoretical impasse of being trapped between *Scylla* and *Charybdis*, and, if there is, whether there is an escape. First, however, some clarifications seem appropriate concerning how the word "metaphysics" is understood in this contribution.

1 Metaphysics – Methodological Presuppositions

At the beginning of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead characterizes his *speculative philosophy*, metaphysics as it is understood here, as follows:

Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of 'interpretation' I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 3)

In *Structure and Being*, L.B. Puntel characterizes in a first step his "structural–systematic philosophy" as a

theory of the most general and universal structures of the unrestricted *universe of discourse* (Puntel, 2008, p. 10, 26).

¹ Timothy Williamson, e.g., starts his 2007 book *The Philosophy of Philosophy* with the question "What can be pursued in an armchair?" (p.1) and aims at giving a rigorous metaphysical/epistemic analysis that defends armchair-philosophy.

As it stands, this characterization has strong similarities with Whitehead's characterization of his "speculative philosophy", as Puntel himself recognizes (Puntel, 2008, p.10).

With respect to both characterizations, "metaphysics" is regarded as a *theoretical* endeavor (viz. Whitehead: "coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas"). This is not the place to give a "theory of theories", rather it is assumed that there are undertakings that are theories and they mainly come in two paradigms: *empirical theories*, more generally: data-based theories, on the one hand, and logic and mathematics, *formal theories*, on the other hand. Metaphysics, moreover, is a theoretical endeavor that has to respect data ("everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought", "unrestricted universe of discourse"). An important aspect of its theoretical task is unifying these data, albeit in a general way ("general ideas", "general and universal structures", "particular instance of the general scheme"). Finally, metaphysics, as a unifying system of general ideas/structures, is *unrestricted in scope*. These characterizations will serve as a working platform in what follows.²

1.1 Coherence

As a theoretical endeavor, metaphysics has to obey formal and/or methodological as well as "external" criteria since it has an internal as well as external aspect. Whitehead calls these aspects the *rational side* and the *empirical side*, respectively.

The most important methodological-internal criterion is "coherence"; it is an ambitious criterion. It means for Whitehead that "everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought" (the data), must not only be embedded into *one* theory, but the theory must also exhibit the interplay of these data. Moreover, it is this interplay *expressed* by the theory that gives the respective ideas or notions their meaning:

"Coherence", as here employed, means that the fundamental ideas, in terms of which the scheme is developed, presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless. This requirement does not mean that they are definable in terms of each other; it means that what is indefinable in one such notion cannot be abstracted from its relevance to the other notions. It is the ideal of speculative philosophy that its fundamental notions shall not seem capable of abstraction from each other. In other words, it is presupposed that no entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe, and it is the business of speculative philosophy to exhibit this truth. This character is its coherence. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 3)

A metaphysical theory is a "theory of everything" and "coherence" expresses its being a *unifying* theory, unrestricted in scope. By this, it exhibits semantic self-sufficiency of sorts.

By coherence, metaphysics shows some similarity with *formal* theories, i.e., logical and mathematical ones. If one regards the dimension of formal theories, including logic and mathematics, their interplay, the meta-theories, and so on, one sees that one never gets outside

² There are obviously other, more specific, philosophical topics that are called "metaphysical". Due to the restrictions of length, these are not the topic of this contribution.

the “formal” dimension. The formal theoretical framework exhibits a semantic self-sufficiency of sorts and any sub-dimension has its connections to “the rest” and it must fit – according to standards formulated within the formal framework. This is coherence at its best. But metaphysics is not a formal theory.

1.2 Adequacy

A metaphysical theory, moreover, has to respect data. This is the most important extrinsic criterion: adequacy. These data are not exclusively “empirical” in a narrow sense. They play their role in “theory building”, at the beginning of the theoretical metaphysical endeavor, as well as at the “end” of this endeavor, to serve as “instances for testing” the theory. A citation of Whitehead’s nicely illustrates this interplay:

The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observations; it makes its flight in the thin air of imaginative generalizations, and it again lands for renewed observations rendered acute by rational interpretation. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 5)

This shows, at least methodologically, similarity with *empirical* theories. But metaphysical theories are not empirical theories in the usual sense of the word as are physics, natural sciences in general, but also, e.g., sociology and psychology.

Metaphysical theories have and should have their data that provide the criterion of adequacy and for any one that understands itself as a unifying theory of the unrestricted universe of discourse there are plenty of data to be recognized.

Of course, there is no metaphysical experiment to be performed, nor are there specific metaphysical and metaphysically regimented observations to test metaphysical findings. Empirical sciences developed and refined their methodologies during their respective histories and within their respective frameworks of scientific culture. For metaphysics, things are not so easy and simple. But, as with any theoretical endeavor, metaphysics has to find *its relevant* data and a way to qualify them and to deal systematically with them. That is a methodological imperative.

2 Scylla and Charybdis – Two Examples

This section presents two metaphysical theories: one caught by the Scylla of being superfluous (cf. Ladyman, Ross et al., 2007), and the other by the Charybdis of being esoteric (cf. Rosenberg, 2004). The main purpose of the presentation of the examples, however, is not to supply evidence that this impasse is present in contemporary metaphysics; this may also be

seen elsewhere. The primary role the examples play in this contribution, different as they are, is to demonstrate that they point to a common stance, a stance that may be regarded as the root of the impasse – albeit with a different strength of emphasis. The root is a tacit assumption of what a metaphysical theory should (also) provide.

The two examples are exploited here because they are, both, general theories and formulated with high standards of rigor. Both are metaphysical theories, not pieces of theories, akin to the characterization of Whitehead's.

2.1 In Search of an External Carrier – *The Charybdis of Being Esoteric*

In his book *A Place for Consciousness: Probing the Deep Structure of the Natural World* (Rosenberg, 2004), Gregg Rosenberg wants to find a place for the phenomenon, or the datum, of consciousness within an otherwise “physical” environment. This place should be coherently connected to those aspects of the “world” that are usually within the scope of natural sciences (“physics”, for short). He calls his position *Liberal Naturalism*, to distinguish it from other brands of “physicalism”.

Rosenberg aims at a theory that is unrestricted in scope and general in character. His book presents a metaphysical theory through models, mostly taken from the discipline of computer sciences. The “phenomenon of consciousness” is both a fact in need of explication and a datum of great importance, as Rosenberg argues (Rosenberg, 2004, pp. 18). This datum, he claims, does not fit the usual scientific standards of objectivity that are to be respected within the empirical sciences.

For Rosenberg, the most important difference concerning the facts that are expressed by empirical scientific or physical theories and the facts about consciousness is the following: “Physical” theories are only “relational” in character, each “fact” expressed by such a theory is explained by the others; and *vice versa*; the facts mutually explain and somehow determine each other: Rosenberg calls theories of this sort “circular”. According to Whitehead's criterion of coherence, that is just what metaphysical theories should be.

Rosenberg's stance, however, is quite different: Due to circularity, these theories do not deal with “contents”. To be ontologically or metaphysically meaningful, however, a theory must not only express “relational facts” or “properties”, but also “intrinsic properties” or qualitative content. These intrinsic or qualitative “properties” or facts stand somehow by themselves.

“Relational facts”, in contrast, are in need of an *external carrier*. “Facts about bare differences (‘relational facts’, CS) cannot entail facts about qualitative content.” So, facts about qualitative content are not accounted for in scientific theories. It is, according to Rosenberg, the task of a metaphysical theory to express facts of qualitative content and to express the interplay of facts of qualitative content with the relational facts. Within such a theory certain facts of qualitative content provide the external carrier for relational facts. Phenomenally conscious properties, facts of (phenomenal) consciousness, phenomenal qualities, as Rosenberg calls them, are the paradigm or facts of content a metaphysical theory should exhibit (cf. Rosenberg, 2004, p. 22).

Moreover, the facts of (phenomenal) consciousness and “physical” facts should be different aspects of an all including or “founding” metaphysical basic structure. In this, the search for and the theoretical elaboration of these fundamental structures or facts has the character of formulating a *prima philosophia* (*deep structure* is Rosenberg’s expression).

To make a long and intricate story short: Rosenberg sees his concrete task in providing an architectonic scheme. The architectonic of his metaphysics is hierarchical and comes in layers: the individuals (his “main category”, so to speak) of each layer are built by individuals of the lower level (by the receptive properties of these individuals, see, Rosenberg, 2004, p. 219).

There is, due to this architecture and presupposition, an ultimate layer/level that carries the “whole building”. Somewhere, at a very high level of this scheme, robust individuals, as are humans, e.g., should show up.

Assuming that Rosenberg’s theory is coherent, what may be said about its adequacy? What may be said about the items and structures at the ultimate level that are, also for Rosenberg, not accessible to “physical” or “empirical” theories? They function as ultimate carriers for the whole universe. Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 2004, p. 237) asks what these ultimate carriers are. After a lengthy reflection, he proposes “phenomenal qualities” of consciousness: “The phenomenal qualities of phenomenal consciousness are perfect candidates” (Rosenberg, p. 238). But they are not “phenomenal qualities” of which we humans have experience. Nor are they “phenomenal qualities” of higher animals to which humans may have – at least indirectly – some access.

Conscious phenomenal qualities, as they are experienced by humans, are only paradigms that model these “ultimate” phenomenal qualities that serve as carriers. Here, Rosenberg should be cited in full length:

The abstract sense that the alien qualities would be like the qualities of our consciousness would come to precisely this: They would be intrinsic *tout court*; they would be determinables and belong to families of determinables (terms of art, C. S.); [...].

The ways they would be different from the qualities of our consciousness would be these: Their specific characters presumably would be entirely different from those of our own qualia; [...]; and they presumably would not be appropriate vehicles for representation and thought. (Rosenberg, 2004, p. 240)

The bedrock of Rosenberg’s universe are “entities” that are not expressible by empirical sciences, they cannot be consciously experienced by humans, nor may they ever be experienced by humans. Somehow, so it seems: “everything is basically consciousness” – but not consciousness in our human sense; it is “*metaphysical consciousness...*”. That is esotericism at its best.

2.2 Weak Metaphysics – the Scylla of Being Superfluous

In their book *Every Thing Must Go* (2007), Ladyman, Ross and co-authors present a theory that they call *weak metaphysics*. They call their theory “*weak*” to express that they reject empirically inert speculations and to set it apart from what they call neo-scholastic metaphysics. The root of avoiding these speculations consists in their extremely strong respect for scientific theories as these are formulated within the respective sciences.

The task of *weak metaphysics* is the unification of (special) scientific theories or hypotheses, based on what they call *fundamental physics*. The methodological constraints this task faces are laid down by the institutionally accepted norms of the *scientific community* of either the special sciences or of fundamental physics:

[...] science is, according to us, demarcated from non-science solely by institutional norms: [...] With respect to anything that is a putative fact about the world, scientific institutional processes are absolutely and exclusively authoritative. (Ladyman, Ross, et al. 2007, p. 28).

Further, Ladyman and Ross, as well as their co-authors, understand the task of metaphysics as *unifying* scientific theories or hypotheses: The sciences submitted to unification are all those sciences that may be called “empirical”. So, not only natural sciences are to be respected, but also sociology, psychology, economy or history, for example.

To make the special status of a *metaphysical* unification explicit, the authors dwell on the difference of *special* sciences (these tackle unifying tasks that are not metaphysical) and *fundamental physics*. This last mentioned science is a sub-field of “institutionalized physics” and deals with, e.g., cosmological theories, quantum field theories, string theories or M-theories. Using theories or hypotheses that belong to *fundamental physics* for the unifying task distinguishes *weak metaphysical* theories from other theories with different and specific unifying tasks.

Within fundamental physics, the task of unification is up solely to the scientists working in that physical field. Fundamental physics is for Ladyman, Ross and co-authors their *prima philosophia* as their principle of the *Primacy of Physics Constraint* reveals:

Special science hypotheses that conflict with fundamental physics, or such consensus as there is in fundamental physics, should be rejected for that reason alone. Fundamental physical hypotheses are not symmetrically hostage to the conclusions of the special sciences. (Ladyman, Ross, et al., 2007, p. 44)

It is fundamental physics that detects, formulates and approves with respect to its scientific standard the most general structures that pervade the whole universe. All other structures, supplied by special sciences or formulated in doing its unifying task by *weak metaphysics* must respect these structures. Moreover, also the structures used for unifying by *weak metaphysics* are not “inventions” of *weak metaphysics*, they are *supplied* by formal theories (viz. *information theory*).

Concerning an independent status of metaphysical theorizing, Ladyman, Ross and co-authors claim that *weak metaphysics* is a theoretical undertaking that has neither a genuine scope nor a genuine methodology. To regard it as a special theory is due to an institutional labor division:

Why should radical methodological naturalists suppose that there is any ‘responsible and significant’ job for metaphysics to do? [...] However, evaluating the global consilience network is not a task *assigned* (emphasis, C.S.) to any particular science, partly because important efficiency considerations recommend specialization. (Ladyman, Ross, et al., 2007, p. 27).

Weak metaphysics is a philosophical position that has deprived itself of a genuine scope. Material fundamental questions and answers concerning the unifying tasks are not the obligation of *weak metaphysics*. *Weak metaphysics* has *found its prima philosophia*, i.e. *fundamental physics*, as it is formulated and as far as it is approved by the respective scientific community. By this, *weak metaphysics* is caught by the *Scylla* of being, beyond pragmatics, superfluous and redundant.

2.3 The Ontological Paradigm – a Common Stance

The *ontological paradigm* may be characterized by Campbell’s *Axiom of Uniformity* – a methodological principle:

Fundamental to the ontological impulse is what we might call the *Axiom of Uniformity*, the conviction that some basic pattern pervades the universe; the proper ontological assay of any one region or sub-part of the whole will mirror the assay elsewhere. There are pervasive basic constituents and pervasive basic structures in which they play always the same roles. At the ultimate level, the universe has a common structure throughout. The pervasive elements, the constantly recurring items in ontological assays, are the categories. (Campbell, 1990, p. 1)

The ontological impulse leads to two sorts of metaphysical theories: One sort may be called “top down”. This means that the theory proceeds by *carving out* the basic constituents and their relevant interplay to make explicit the uniform character of its unrestricted scope. Hereby it conceives of the unrestricted scope of the metaphysical endeavor as somehow pre-theoretically given. It faces the task of showing that its “carving out” meets the scope at the right joints.

The other sort may be called “bottom up”. It seeks to explicate the unrestricted scope of the metaphysical endeavor by “rebuilding” it. To this end, the theory may “invent” categories and their interplay not found at the outset and has therefore the task of showing whether these “inventions” lead to an adequate architectonic.

In any case, the ontological impulse leads to what may be called the “ontological paradigm”: It is the main task of a metaphysical theory to make explicit what the “pervasive *basic* (or most general) constituents and pervasive *basic* (or most general) structures in which they play always the same roles” are and how they relate to each other. Moreover, if a metaphysical theory

fails in this respect, it fails altogether. In short: doing metaphysics within the “ontological paradigm” leads to articulating a metaphysical – in contrast to a local – ontology.

Rosenberg’s theory is certainly of the second kind since he explicitly presents a constitutional theory and a hierarchical architectonic. The “natural individuals”, especially those at the basic layer, may well be called “inventions”.

Weak metaphysics is also in search of an “ontological model”: “We seek an ontological model according to which science is unifiable, and which explains the basis for such unity as it can produce. This, we claim, is the point of naturalistic metaphysics.” (Ladyman, Ross, et al. 2007, p. 53).

This model is based on the methodological restrictions formulated by the “Principle of Naturalistic Closure” and the “Principle of Physics Constraint”. These restrictions, however, have consequences for the “ontology”, the “categories”, that *weak metaphysics* provides. It leads to the ontological model that is called *ontic structural realism*. *Ontic Structural Realism* may be characterized *in nuce* by the claim that structures (paradigmatic are mathematical structures) are ontological: they are “real” and there is not anything else but structures. This position is rooted in the observation that fundamental physics avails itself of mathematical models or structures, and does so successfully. The methodological aspect thereof reads as follows:

Objective modalities (lawful connections *cum grano salis*, *C.S.*) in the material mode are represented by logical and mathematical modalities in the formal mode. All legitimate metaphysical hypotheses are, according to us, claims of this kind. A metaphysical hypothesis is to be motivated in every case by empirical hypotheses that one or more particular empirical substructures are embedded in (homomorphic to) particular theoretical structures in the formal mode that represent particular intensional/modal relations among measurements of real patterns. (Ladyman, Ross, et al., 2007, p. 119)

The methodological constraints *weak metaphysics* submits itself to are in service of an ontology to be formulated. And the relevant ontological theory may be seen as “top down” in character: The fundamental structures are *found* within fundamental physics and the structures explicating the interplay of the structures of special sciences and fundamental physics are “found” also within formal sciences. This, however, means, that “ontology” is left to other sciences and *weak metaphysics* aims only to coordinate these different ontological frameworks so *found*. One may interpret the overall stance of *weak metaphysics* as saying that the sciences are better at doing ontology and that fundamental physics formulates the most fundamental ontology and, thus, exhibits “the pervasive basic structures”.

2.4 Some General Analysis

Both metaphysical attempts, however, have in common that they conceive of a metaphysical *ontology* as being an important integral part of metaphysical theorizing. Moreover, both search for unification. But the scope of what is to be submitted to unification is different: *weak metaphysics* is restricted in scope: its scope is co-extensive with the scope of empirical

scientific theories. And by this and by the overall ontological stance, the “entities”, the “connections among them”, the role the “pervasive patterns” play, for short: the ontology, is given by the empirical sciences. To put it differently: Special empirical sciences have their own ontologies. The most general and fundamental ontology is *found within fundamental physics*.

Moreover, since, during their respective histories, the empirical sciences have developed *their* methodologies for testing or exhibiting the adequacy of *their* ontological hypotheses, *weak metaphysics* inherits also its methodology from them. And so, not least due to their methodologies, for *weak metaphysics* empirical sciences are the only theoretical endeavors that say anything respectable about “what there is”.

The scope of the more ambitious metaphysics of Rosenberg’s goes beyond the scope of empirical sciences. It explicitly deals with a dimension that neither is within the scope of empirical sciences nor even can be within their scope: the qualitative content of consciousness. Presupposing that there are few zombies among humans, it **includes within its scope** “everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed [...]”. Of course, there are empirical sciences that occupy themselves with consciousness in various ways, but they do not and cannot do so with respect to qualitative content of consciousness *proper*; only the mediated “outer aspects” may be grasped by them. This is due to the fact that qualitative content of consciousness *proper* is a first–person affair, a “what is it like to be a ...”, to use a phrase of Thomas Nagel’s.

The ensuing esoteric character of Rosenberg’s metaphysics is due to several presuppositions: 1) A metaphysical ontology is an integral part of a metaphysical theory. 2) The metaphysical ontology is “bottom up”. At bottom, there is a layer of basic entities. There is, further, a “glue” that somehow holds tight hierarchically constituted entities of higher complexity. 3) There is no emergence in any creative way. Given these assumptions together with the assumptions that qualitative content *proper*, as experiences of humans, belongs to a higher layer of the hierarchical construction and that qualitative content *proper* cannot be constructed out of “physical entities”, one is lead to basic entities, proto-qualia so to speak, whose “specific characters presumably would be entirely different from those of our own qualia” (Rosenberg, 2004, p. 240).

To sum up: The ontology of an ambitious – and esoteric – metaphysics is with respect to important aspects “invented”, whereas the ontology of *weak metaphysics* is “inherited”.

2.5 Adequacy and the Ontological Paradigm

A glance at the task for “testing adequacy”, Whitehead’s landing **[?]**, may reveal that it is the “ontological paradigm” that is the “culprit” for trapping metaphysics between *redundancy* and *esoterics*: Other theories, especially empirical theories, may serve for judging the adequacy of a metaphysical ontology. Here, one faces the problem that other theories, especially empirical theories, have their own **ontologies** (explicitly accepted by *weak metaphysics*).

Comparing an “invented” ontology with another ontology formulated explicitly or implicitly by some other non-philosophical theory results, exaggeratedly formulated, in the following impasse: If there is another (scientific or empirical) theory that corroborates within its own scope and due to its own methodology a metaphysical ontology, then this shows that the metaphysical ontology is superfluous – **except, perhaps, as resulting from a fruitful division of division**. If there is no corroborating “external” theory, then a metaphysical theory may be genuine but **must be** esoteric in character.

It may be the case that “testing” presupposes some conceptual adaptations or “translation” to get off the ground at all. Here, seemingly, a certain dialectic shows up: the better the “translation” – the fit – the more superfluous the theory turns out to be.

One methodological consequence thereof could be (in the spirit of an esoteric metaphysics): Conceiving of other (empirical or scientific) theories as only very weakly relevant for adequacy: then there should be no contradiction whatever that may be. This, however, is too weak for **providing** coherence in any non-trivial sense, since metaphysical theories and “external theories” would somehow live side-by-side.

The other consequence of the impasse would be – in the spirit of *weak metaphysics*: Look at the sciences to find a most general – metaphysical – ontology and show how the ontology so found is most general and how it relates to the other sciences.

The “ontological paradigm” leads to an esoteric metaphysics by “inventing” “entities” or “structures”. From a methodological point of view, this trivializes both coherence and adequacy. But it leads also to **losing** a genuine field for metaphysics by inheriting “entities” or “structures” and the methodologies from other (empirical or scientific) theories. For sure, this solves the adequacy-task and makes the coherence-task easier. Confronted with that impasse, **one option would be to** give up the “ontological paradigm”. But, what else could be a task for metaphysics?

3 Another Paradigm

Whitehead’s remark, cited above, may give a hint how to avoid the trap between redundancy and esoterics: He characterizes his speculative philosophy – metaphysics – as the “endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary *system of general ideas*”. By this, he points at a methodological paradigm different from the ontological paradigm.

3.1 The Paradigm of Transcendentals

Again, Whitehead’s characterization of the metaphysical task:

Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of ‘interpretation’ I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as

enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 3)

or Puntel's characterization of metaphysics as the

theory of the most general and universal structures of the unrestricted *universe of discourse* (Puntel, 2008, p. 10, p. 26).

Neither author speaks of “building blocks”, basic “constituents” or “fundamental structures” that serve as *constituents* of all the rest. Nor are they in search of a “basic glue” that makes all these basic constituents hold tightly together. Especially Whitehead speaks of “general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted”. “General ideas” are not “building-blocks”, nor are “structures”.

The citations above may be paraphrased and slightly altered as follows:

Metaphysics is the endeavor to embed all those most general “ideas”, “concepts”, “notions” or “propositions”, etc. into *one theoretical framework* that is *presupposed* by anything that is found within the *unrestricted universe of discourse* and whose working “concepts”, “notions”, “propositions”, their interplay and their connections within this *theoretical framework* can “truly” be “attributed” to anything that is found within the *unrestricted universe of discourse*.

These most general “ideas”, “notions”, “concepts”, “propositions” and the role they should play *within the theoretical framework*, the (metaphysical) theory, for short, may be called for better or worse *transcendentals* and the metaphysical working-paradigm the “*paradigm of transcendentals*”. The expression *transcendental(s)* should hint at both features: “generality” and the character of being “universally presupposed”.³

Besides “generality”, there are two key-words in the characterization above: “truly” and “presupposed”. Concerning the second word: admittedly, other theories have their theoretical frameworks, and some of them are very general. They may play a fundamental and “leading” role with respect to other theories. Some theories have their associated meta-theories that exhibit what is presupposed with respect to the respective theory. But none of these is about the presupposition of any (scientific or empirical) theory, not to speak of formal theories or other things “of which we are conscious as enjoyed, perceived, [...]”.

The first word, “true”, may indicate a problem. How is “true” to be understood? This, however is more of a task than a problem: A metaphysical theory that works within the “paradigm of transcendentals” has to co-formulate its theory of truth. Or it has to presuppose a theory of truth. But the metaphysical theory will not leave the theory of truth as it was found.

³ The reflections above do not claim that the *paradigm of transcendentals* is a new metaphysical stance. The theories of Whitehead or Hegel may be seen, at least to a certain degree, in this way. But, to judge this issue may be left to interpreters with more expertise in these matters.

There are, consequently, always at least two transcendentals to be coordinated by a metaphysical theory that works within the paradigm of transcendentals: “Truth” and one (or more) other transcendental(s).

This characterization of a metaphysical theory, however, is not without problems. The first has to do with both, the extreme generality of the “transcendentals”, better: the theory embedding these “transcendentals”, on the one hand, and the unrestrictedness of its scope, on the other. “Generality” hosts the danger of triviality. Must it not be the case that an ensuing theory “speaks” of everything, but says nothing? And, due to being unrestricted in scope, must it not be the case that there is nothing left to serve as a non-trivial and not yet presupposed instance for testing adequacy?

3.2 Adequacy – Again

Concerning the two criteria for evaluating metaphysical theories: coherence and adequacy, coherence is, as it is a methodological demand, a *conditio sine qua non*, for any theoretical endeavor. That does not mean that it is easy to achieve. More demanding in a principal way is the criterion of adequacy. It is this criterion that revealed, with respect to the ontological paradigm, redundancy on the one hand and esoterics on the other.

Working within the paradigm of transcendentals, the problem concerning adequacy presents itself as different from the problem raised by the ontological paradigm. The problem there is rooted in the tacit assumption that adequacy is an *external* criterion and respectable “test-cases” are to be found in areas “*outside*” of philosophy or metaphysics.

Understanding “external” this way, however, is appropriate only for metaphysical theories working within the *ontological paradigm* not least because “external theories”, non-philosophical theories, have their own ontologies.

Moreover, within the ontological paradigm, the assumption that adequacy is an external criterion is mandatory: Metaphysical theories, working within the ontological paradigm, present themselves with the claim (among other claims) that they exhibit or “carve out” the “pervasive elements, the constantly recurring items”, the “basic constituents” of the *universe of discourse*. These, however, by being basic or pervasive must be found in any empirical science (or other field) and must there play **a role similar to the one that** the metaphysical ontology demands. If these elements or pervasive patterns are not found there or not embeddable with respect to the standards of the “testing field”, then there is no point in maintaining a metaphysical ontology that takes them as basic or pervasive. Otherwise, one would be back to “metaphysical water”. Not passing a test for adequacy, adequacy as an external criterion – pointing at non-philosophical “test-cases” – tends to be a last negative word for any metaphysical theory that is akin to the ontological paradigm.

The “transcendentals” of a metaphysical theory akin to the paradigm of transcendentals, however, are those “most general ideas” or *presuppositions* that should be at work in any theoretical undertaking or in any field, whether they are explicitly dealt with or only implicitly as it is, perhaps, in most cases. Due to this, any theory (or field)

could serve as test-case. But, if one should succeed in testing, one has not gained anything important: due to the high generality of transcendentals, any positive result with respect to any test-case is rather trivial. It somehow exhibits rather straightforwardly what has been built in.

On the other hand, to find that a metaphysical theory akin to the “paradigm of transcendentals” does not pass the test of adequacy with respect to a non-philosophical theory or field is informative. This means that the theory must not necessarily be abandoned, it could possibly be revised and/or augmented. This revision presumably revises also the starting theory as well as its associated theory of truth. The revised/augmented theory, in turn, is to be submitted to the criterion of coherence and “tested” with respect to an external theory or field.

The following example should illustrate this: Concerning the transcendental “expressibility”, it is obvious that any theoretical endeavor, any endeavor that pretends saying “something true” about any domain, presupposes the “expressibility” of that domain. So, it seems, the transcendental “expressibility” does not fit to other things “of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, ...” as are, e.g., experiences “actually had” by one specific human, “what-it-is-like-nesses”, “feelings”, performances of art. All these are not theoretical in character and not prone to “expressibility” in the tacitly assumed theoretical sense above. Things of that sort belong to the unrestricted *universe of discourse*, and so, a theory working within the paradigm of transcendentals must take care of them. But this does not diminish the generality of “expressibility” and its being presupposed by theorizing. Findings of that sort, rather, indicate that the theory formulated so far is not trivial. They may indicate also how to expand the “initial” theory, may it be with help of a further transcendental, both together exhausting the unrestricted *universe of discourse*. This, in turn, would lead to modifying or adapting one’s theory of truth so far exploited and the interplay of the “old” and the “new” transcendental must be made explicit not leaving the “old” as it was found.

Of course, one may wonder whether a process of revision, modification and adaption of an initial metaphysical theory may come to an end. One may further ask whether a theory modified in the light of external adequacy is the “same theory” as the starting one; one may, further, ask to what “degree of similarity” successive theories can be regarded as being in “continuity”. These questions, however, may be asked and are asked with respect to any theory – as they are within the *philosophy of science*. This is not the place to scrutinize this important family of topics. Anyhow, the remarks above may indicate that metaphysical theorizing is, at least from a methodological point of view, not too different from other theoretical endeavors.

Besides external adequacy, understood as pointing at non-philosophical “test-cases”, there are important criteria of adequacy relevant for a metaphysical theory akin to the *paradigm of transcendentals* that may be called *inner-philosophical*.

Inner-philosophical adequacy is associated with the questions whether the theory may be refined, whether the theory expresses something new, whether the theory is able to integrate

other relevant theories or findings, whether it is apt for revisions, whether it may contribute to solve or resolve longstanding problems. These are criteria that address mainly other philosophical theories, concurring theories as well as more special theories. To find problematic philosophical discussions and positions, to situate – and to some extent re-express them – within a new metaphysical framework and to show a possibility to resolve those problems, belong to testing for *inner-philosophical* adequacy.

Due to its being unrestricted in scope, a metaphysical theory working within the paradigm of transcendentals should be able to incorporate on a very general level other more special philosophical theories as well as other areas of philosophical discourse, such as ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of mind or philosophy of mathematics, to name only some of them. It should have, general as it is, a definite stance towards other philosophical fields.

L.B. Puntel's book *Structure and Being* is a case in point concerning the exposition of these inner-philosophical relations. Exploiting these relations is a test for *inner-philosophical* adequacy.

The small list of criteria formulated above are not meant to present a complete and undisputable catalogue; there may well be other criteria. It is, however, a methodological task to look for criteria, to making them explicit and to apply them once a piece of metaphysical theory is formulated. In any case, the task of applying them does not arise until a theory has reached an elaborated state.

Here, one may ask whether the occupation with *inner-philosophical* adequacy leads back to esoteric philosophizing. That, however, is not necessarily the case. Any theory that pretends to express something new in *its* field has to consider how it fares with other theories of its field, with the theory it modifies, with problems of its field, etc. Other theoretical endeavors also have criteria of adequacy within their methodological canon that relate to the field the theory belongs to.

It is more a sign of not being redundant and of self-standing of a whole theoretical field than of playful self-centered (pseudo-)discourses. Of course, those discourses are present in philosophy and it is a methodological and practical task to avoid them.

In the end, the best way to argue for a philosophical position is to give an important example. The *structural-systematic philosophy* of Puntel's is certainly a case in point for a metaphysical theory that is akin to the *paradigm of transcendentals*. This is argued for and presented in another article of the author (Schneider, 2013).

4 In the End: The Best Question Ever Asked?

T. Williamson starts the *Afterword* of his book *The Philosophy of Philosophy* with an amusing story:

Imagine a philosophy conference in Presocratic Greece. The hot question is: what are things made of? Followers of Thales say that everything is made of water, followers of Anaximenes that everything is made of air, and followers of Heraclitus that everything is made of fire. Nobody is quite clear what these claims mean; some question whether the founders of the respective schools made them. But among the groupies there is a buzz about all the recent exciting progress. The mockers and doubters make plenty of noise too. [...]. They diagnose Thales, Anaximenes, and Heraclitus as suffering from a tendency to over-generalize. We can intelligibly ask what bread is made of, or what houses are made of, but to ask what *things in general* are made of is senseless, some suggest, [...].

The mockers and doubters had it easy, but we know now that in at least one important respect they were wrong. With however much confusion, Thales and the rest were asking one of the best questions ever to have been asked, a question that has painfully led to much of modern science. [...] Much of the progress made since the Presocratics consists in the development of good methods for bringing evidence to bear on questions that, when first asked, appear hopelessly elusive and naïve. (Williamson, 2007, pp. 278)

The lesson to be learned from this story seems twofold: It was Metaphysics that formulated one of the best theoretical questions – an *ontological* question *par excellence*. But, during history, it handed it over to special sciences – theoretical endeavors that emanated from it. These are better at dealing with this question. In the end, so it seems, the best contribution of metaphysics to the overall concert of theoretical endeavors has been depriving itself of its *ontological* task.

L.B. Puntel formulates a similar but more general analysis in the introduction to his book *Structure and Being*:

On the whole, one can speak of the gradual development of the sciences as we know them today as a process of their emancipation from philosophy.

Many authors interpret this process – a historical one in the truest sense of the word – as an utterly negative development for philosophy, maintaining that philosophy is, increasingly, deprived of its subject matter. Some go so far as to contend that by now philosophy no longer has any subject of its own. (Puntel, 2008, p.12)

But for Puntel, this development must not necessarily be regarded as an evil:

This book [*Structure and Being*, C.S.] maintains the opposing thesis that this process can have an eminently positive effect in that it can clarify the theoretical undertaking that, from its very beginning, has borne the name “philosophy”, making possible the identification of that undertaking’s specific status. (Puntel, 2008, p.12)

Concerning metaphysics, so it is hoped, the reflections above could contribute to the “identification of the undertaking’s specific status” – at least with respect to methodology: it is not the *ontological paradigm* that belongs to metaphysics’ specific status; it is the *paradigm of transcendentals* that may preserve the autonomy of metaphysics without driving it towards esoterics.

References

- Campbell, K., 1990, *Abstract Particulars*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Chalmers, D.; Manley, D.; Wasserman, R.H. (eds.): 2009, *Metametaphysics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hofweber, Th., 2009, “Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics”, in: Chalmers/Manley/Wasserman, 2009, 260-289.
- Ladyman, J., Ross, D., 2007, *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*. With the collaboration of D. Spurrett and J. Collier. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press
- Mulligan, K., Simons, P., Smith, B.: 2006, What’s Wrong with Contemporary Philosophy? *Topoi* **25**, 63–67.
- Puntel, L. B., 2008, *Structure and Being. A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*. University Park: Pennsylvania University Press. Translated by and in collaboration with Alan White.
- Rosenberg, G., 2004, *A Place for Consciousness. Probing the Deep Structure of the Natural World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schneider, C.: 2013, Metaphysics between Scylla and Charybdis. An Analytical Perspective. *Balkan Journal of Philosophy* **5**, No1, 5–18.

Whitehead, A. N.: 1978, *Process and Reality*. Corrected Edition. D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne Editors. New York/London: The Free Press.

Williamson, T., 2007, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.