

CHAPTER THREE

METAPHYSICS

1. Setting the general framework

Before we can put our simple, particular and qualitative tropes to work, the general framework within which these entities here appear must be explicitly laid out. To this avail it is not enough to point out that the theory here developed is *metaphysical*. This is not enough, because in the course of their use terms such as ‘metaphysics’ and ‘ontology’ have acquired so many different meanings (some degrading) that they have ended up with no particular meaning at all.⁴⁶ Saying of a certain theoretical framework that it is metaphysical signals a certain ambition, but unless the particular *sense* in which said framework is metaphysical is explained, it does little more than that.

To interpret the various statements that the theory here developed contains, we need therefore to formulate the particular sense in which our theory is metaphysical. This will include spelling out the basic philosophical intuitions on which the investigation rests. It will also include accounting for the fundamental features of the particular method here adopted. Naturally, such an undertaking is highly ambitious given the space it has here been accorded. It touches upon very basic and very complicated issues that it takes most philosophers a lifetime to (if indeed they are successful) to clearly formulate. As they stand, therefore, the discussions to follow are incomplete. They are nevertheless included, because I feel that for full comprehension of the more specific discussions to follow, the reader needs to have at least some idea of what underlies and is thought to justify the statements made within these discussions.

This chapter of the book includes comments on some of the matters that I believe are important for obtaining a proper understanding of the *general* framework in which this investigation is set.⁴⁷ What will be discussed is, first, what I call the *aim* of investigation. By ‘aim’ I mean two things. First, I mean by it: subject matter, as in *what the theory is about*. Interestingly enough, I find that in metaphysical investigations, the proper subject matter is often hard to identify. This may be because, in metaphysics, the question of what

⁴⁶ The terms ‘metaphysics’ and ‘ontology’ are here used as if they were interchangeable. In the philosophical literature these terms are at times treated as having slightly different meaning. This difference is then taken to consist mainly in the scope intended. ‘Metaphysics’ is then taken to be a term with a greater scope than ‘ontology’.

⁴⁷ This will be followed in Chapter Four by an exposition of the *particular* methodological assumptions adopted here.

a certain theory is about is complicated by the intricate interplay between language, mind and the external world — so much so, in fact, that the disentangling of the ‘true’ subject matter of investigation is an essential part of the clear exposition of any metaphysical position.

The aim of investigation should also include a statement of what I would like to call the ‘goal’ of investigation. That is, if we are to properly understand and structure what follows, we need at the outset of an investigation an inkling of where we expect our theorising to end up. We need to have at least a vague idea of what features, or characteristics, of our previously identified subject matter that we anticipate will be part of our final theory.

After dealing briefly with the matter of the aim of investigation I turn to consider the matter of *how* the agreed upon aim should be achieved. Here the matter of the *method* of investigation is treated in a very general manner. The particular method guiding the present investigation will be presented in more detail in chapter four of this book. I end the present chapter with a few comments on the probability of success when it comes to matters of metaphysics.

2. The aim of investigation

2.1 Subject matter

The subject matter of a metaphysical investigation is one or both of two realms: the *mental*, and its content of thoughts about the world; or the external *world*, seen as distinct from, or at least not necessarily identical with, the mental.

Corresponding at least partly with this distinction is Strawson’s 1959 division of the general enterprise of metaphysics into the two major kinds: *descriptive* and *revisionary* metaphysics.⁴⁸ According to Strawson, the difference between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics is that “[d]escriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world”, whereas “revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.”⁴⁹ Although Strawson acknowledges that there has perhaps never been any philosopher who has been either completely descriptive or completely revisionary, he still believes that one can distinguish broadly between philosophers such as Descartes, Leibniz and Berkeley, who have been predominantly revisionary, and philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant, who have been descriptive.

How does the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics relate to the subject matter listed above? A quick look at the two distinctions

⁴⁸ Strawson, P. F.: 1959, *Individuals*. Routledge: London and New York.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

suggests that the descriptive metaphysician must regard the *mental* as the proper subject matter of investigation. After all, he or she is “content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world.” Yet, in spite of appearances, the subject matter for a certain descriptive metaphysician is decided more by the intentions that lie behind his or her descriptions than by the actual describing itself. To see why, notice that there may be several reasons why one would be “content” to describe the actual structure of our thoughts about the world rather than attempt to “produce a better structure” as the revisionary metaphysician does.

One reason would be that one just happens to be interested in the way we think, and how this thinking is structured. In this case, the subject matter of investigation is unproblematically the mind.

A second reason would be that one believes that the way we think about the world *is* the way the world is. The belief that the structure of one’s thoughts about the world provides us with the structure of the world itself can, in turn, have one of two grounds.

It may be that one believes that the structure of one’s thoughts about the world is *identical* with the structure of the world. This might be either because one’s general philosophical outlook is idealist and includes the belief that the world of the mental is the only world, or because one believes that it is in principle impossible to distinguish between one’s conception(s) of the world and the world itself. If for either of these reasons one *identifies* the structure of our thoughts about the world with the structure of the world itself, distinguishing between mind and world as different subject matter will no longer seem relevant. The issue of which of these would be the subject matter of interest becomes a non-issue.

One may, on the other hand, believe that looking into the structure of one of these realms (that of the mental) will give us the structure of the other simply because one believes that, although it is in fact possible to distinguish between the way one thinks about the world and the world in itself, the basic structural features of our thoughts about the world *mirror or exactly resemble* the basic structural features of the world. For philosophers holding a view of this kind it would seem that the subject matter of investigation is *not* the mental but rather the external world. That is, although one is content to describe the structure of one’s thoughts about the world this may be just a means to an end. The true subject matter may still be the external world.

For the revisionary metaphysician the subject matter of investigation seems more straightforward. His or her willingness to revise the actual structure of our thoughts about the world where such improvement turns out to be necessary seems to rest firmly on the assumption that the true matter of interest is that which our thoughts are *about* — namely, the world — and not the mind *per se*. In this the revisionary metaphysician and the last kind of descriptive metaphysician distinguished above (the one who is content to describe the structure of our thoughts about the world because he or she

believes that this structure mirrors or exactly resembles the basic structure of the world itself) are the same. But they are also different in one important sense. The revisionary metaphysician is prepared to *revise* the structure of our thoughts about the world in order for these to depict the actual structure of the world more accurately. This seems to imply that the revisionary metaphysician does not assume that the basic structure of our thoughts about the world mirrors or exactly resembles that of the basic structure of the world, since in that case no corrections would ever be necessary.

The fact that the revisionary metaphysician is prepared to allow for, or even execute, revisions of the basic structure of our thoughts about the world does not necessarily imply that he or she regards the original structure as in some sense wrong or inappropriate. Being a revisionary metaphysician seems rather to amount to the following:

1. The belief that the actual structure of our thoughts about the world need not provide us with the actual structure of the world (i.e. it is possible that the structures are not only distinct but also different).
2. The belief that additional information about the way the world is might lead us to *correct* the actual structure of our thoughts about the world so as to accommodate this new information.
3. The belief that new information, or the development of theories that reveal a structure of the world that in some sense differs from the structure disclosed in our thoughts, *need not* make us revise the structure of our thoughts in the sense indicated in (2). There is always the possibility that the actual structure of our thoughts about the world can be reductively or otherwise linked to the (different) basic structure of the world.

In any work on any subject some basic assumptions must be made. In the present work one such assumption is that there is an external world, and that this external world is substantially distinct from our thoughts about it. Given this assumption, the theory here defended must, consequently, be either descriptive in the last, mirror sense, or it must be revisionary. Whichever it is will depend on whether or not we are prepared to assume that the structure of our thoughts or linguistic utterances about the world mirrors, or exactly resembles, the structure of the world.

Although I am prepared to grant a good deal in order to get my metaphysical investigation started, I am not prepared to make the latter assumption. There are, as I see it, too many countervailing reasons to make such an assumption at all viable. These are not decisive reasons, but they raise sufficient doubt for me to conclude that a metaphysical investigation based on the assumption of a distinction between our thoughts about the world and the external world itself will be no honest toil unless at least the *possibility* of not only a distinction but also a *difference* between thought and world is

acknowledged. The existence of several, distinct and equally important conceptual schemes is one such reason. We generally accept the relatively harmonious co-existence of, say, the 'everyday' image of the world and the 'scientific' image, but the basic constituents and structures revealed in each of these images are not equally readily combined. The mere possibility of imagining creatures organising the world in a way that little resembles our own is another such reason.⁵⁰ The obvious practicality of the way we structure the world is a third. It is of course possible that the world is 'made' to fit us and our kind, but it is not evident why this should be so.

For these reasons our project is revisionary and not descriptive. It is the basic structure of the world — a structure not necessarily identical with, or similar to, the basic structure of our thoughts about the world — that is the subject matter of investigation.

2.2 Goal

It seems excessive to ask, of any theory that is about the external world, that it should be able to account for *every* aspect of that world. Therefore any formulation of the aim of investigation must also include some restrictions as to the subject matter. Here I take this to mean, not only that the subject matter of investigation needs to be clearly identified, but that we must also explicitly state what I call the *goal* of investigation. We need to state, that is, of which aspect(s) of the external world we can reasonably expect our theory to provide some account.

The goal of this investigation has already been indicated. Briefly put, it is the *structural* features of reality that are of interest here. To borrow a term from Husserl, we might say that the ontology to be developed below is more *formal* than substantial.⁵¹ This means that we should not expect the theory to be able to provide answers to question such as the following. What tropes are there? Which tropes must exist in order for this or that particular proposition to be true? How many tropes are there? And so on. These are all substantial questions and therefore beyond the scope of the present work. Deeming our investigation formal also means settling on a certain *scope* of investigation, in that a formal investigation can be said to have *wide* scope and less substantial content. The scope of a formal investigation consists in the investigation of the abstract categories under which *all* experiences are subsumed. Saying that the investigation has a wide scope in this sense naturally does not mean that it should be able to, in some sense, explain, or ground, or provide information about, *everything* so subsumed. Indeed if it could, the

⁵⁰ For more on the possibility of such strange ways of organising things, see Hirsch, E.: 1993, *Dividing Reality*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

⁵¹ Simons makes a similar distinction in his 1998, 'Metaphysical Systematics: A Lesson from Whitehead', *Erkenntnis*, vol. 48, nos. 2/3, p. 380.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0656-2>

If Tropes

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2002, XI, 188 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0656-2