

Preface

Metaphysical theories are beautiful. I mean it literally. At the end of this book, I will defend the view that metaphysical theories possess aesthetic properties and that these play a crucial role when it comes to theory evaluation and theory choice.

But this is the end of a long journey—a journey that is perhaps more important than the destination. Before we get there, the philosophical path I propose to follow starts with three discussions of metaphysical equivalence. I shall begin with Relationism and Substantivalism about time, and with the Bundle theory and Substratum theory of material objects, and in both cases I will argue for a kind of equivalence between these traditional enemies—thus, we shall have two original examples of metaphysical equivalence.

Second, I will discuss the case of Perdurantism and Endurantism, which some have thought of as a good example of metaphysical equivalence as well. As we shall see, however, this is correct only to some extent, and there does remain room for substantive—as opposed to purely verbal—disagreement. As my examination of this debate will show, there is room for the metaontological/methodological view that a debate is largely, but not entirely, merely verbal and that some parts of it are substantive, and decidable by philosophical methods. Thus, we shall have an original example of *partial* metaphysical equivalence.

I will then focus on the Presentism versus Eternalism controversy, and argue against the claims of equivalence between these two views that have been raised in the literature. I believe that these views are not equivalent in any interesting sense, and more importantly, I believe that those who make claims of equivalence concerning them do so because they use a flawed methodology when doing metaontology. Thus, we shall have an example (as well as others) of metaphysical non-equivalence.

So, here is the first thing that I wish to achieve in this book, and that will stem from the discussions above: articulate a metaontological view which emphasizes that when asking the question “Are metaphysical debates substantive or verbal?” the correct answer is “It depends.” Some debates are substantive, some debates are merely verbal, sometimes it is true that a problem or a question can be formulated in

equally good frameworks where there is no fact of the matter as to which one is correct or where we just cannot know it. Furthermore, it is possible, and it is true in the case of the persistence debate, that inside a debate some points are merely verbal while other are places of substantive disagreement. A general methodological point will arise: the best way to do meta-metaphysics is to do first-level metaphysics.

A second thing I will elaborate at this point concerns primitiveness. Indeed, my way of arguing for or against any equivalence claims largely depends on the nature of primitives and on the role they play in each of the theories involved. In general, in most metaphysical debates a lot depends on primitives—indeed, metaphysical theories heavily rely on the use of primitives that they typically appeal to. So, I will emphasize here the utmost importance of primitives in the construction of metaphysical theories and in the subsequent evaluation of them. I will claim that almost all of the explanatory power of metaphysical theories comes from their primitives, and I will scrutinize the notion of “power” and “explanatory”. All together, these points will naturally lead me to defend a global view on the nature of the metaphysical enterprise: what is at stake in metaphysics is to find out not just what there is or what there is not, but what is more fundamental than what—to find out what are the best primitives.

Armed with this understanding of the way metaphysical theories work, I shall then raise the simple but complicated question: how to make a choice between competing metaphysical theories? If two theories are equivalent, then perhaps we do not need to make a choice. But what about all the other cases of non-equivalent “equally good” theories? I shall use some of the theories discussed above as examples and I shall examine some traditional meta-theoretical criteria for theory choice (various kinds of simplicity, compatibility with physics, compatibility with intuitions, explanatory power, internal consistency,...) only to show that they do not allow us to make a choice—that is following one or more of these criteria will not help us to tell which theory is preferable to the others. We will see that even in cases of non-equivalent theories, metaphysicians can find themselves in a situation where it is far from clear how to make a choice between competing theories, or even that such a choice can be made.

Among the meta-theoretical criteria for theory evaluation and theory choice, compatibility with our intuitions strikes me as being especially important in metaphysics. Metaphysical theories are often counter-intuitive. But they are often also strongly supported and motivated by intuitions. One way or another, the link between intuitions and metaphysics is a strong and important one, and there is hardly any metaphysical discussion where intuitions do not play a crucial role. I will focus on a particular kind of such intuitions, namely those that come, at least partly, from experience. There seems to be a route from experience to metaphysics, and I shall examine it carefully. At the end of the day, I shall argue that this route is a treacherous one, and phenomenological considerations are in fact orthogonal to the allegedly ‘corresponding’ metaphysical claims.

At this point of this philosophical journey, one may want to sit back and reflect on what the above considerations—if correct—imply. If neither intuitions nor other meta-theoretical criteria can help us in deciding between competing non-equivalent

metaphysical theories, how then shall we make that choice? Here again, considerations about the theories' explanatory power, coming mostly from their primitives, will play a crucial role in the sense that it will appear that there are important cases of non-equivalent, competing, but equally good, theories (my main example will be the Tropes vs. Universals vs. Nominalism debate). What to do then?

This is where I shall argue that metaphysical theories possess aesthetic properties—grounded in non-aesthetic properties—and that these play a crucial role in theory choice and evaluation. Indeed, it seems that the aesthetic properties of a theory can be appealed to when it comes to preferring one theory over another. In short, the view at hand is that metaphysical theories are beautiful and that contemplating their beauty is what drives us to prefer one to another.

This view, as well as all the meta-metaphysical considerations discussed throughout the book, will naturally lead me to a form of anti-realism, and at the end of the journey I shall sit down to rest, and to offer reasons to think better of the kind of anti-realist view I propose to embrace.

Meta-metaphysics

On Metaphysical Equivalence, Primitiveness, and Theory
Choice

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2016, XI, 135 p. 20 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-25332-9