

Metaphysics as an attempt to have one's cake and eat it

Jaroslav Peregrin^{*}

www.cuni.cz/~peregrin

[to appear in *Metaphysics in the Post-Metaphysical Age*, ed. P. Simons and U. Meixner, Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, Wien]

Why not metaphysics?

Metaphysics is usually understood as the investigation of being *qua* being and of its ultimate categories. Given this characterization, it may be hard to grasp why anyone might wish to oppose metaphysics, why anyone might claim that metaphysics "leads the philosopher into complete darkness" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p.18)? What could be so misleading about the investigation of the most abstract vestiges of being?

One source of disparagement towards metaphysics, of course, stems from the relativist conviction that there is no absolute being, and hence nor are there any ultimate categories of being. Another 'reason' for some philosophers of this century (notably Carnap) to reject metaphysics appeared to consist in their reinterpretation of the word "metaphysics", in effect, simply as "nonsensical philosophy". However neither of these reasons seems to be the Wittgensteinian one.

The way I propose to envisage this reason takes us back to Plato with his distinction between *Being* and *Becoming* (echoed, in one or another form, within the conceptions of so many subsequent philosophers). It is the distinction between the 'higher' realm of ideas with its crisp, eternal truths, and the 'lower' realm of appearances in which anything appears only as a fuzzy and transient reflection of something from the higher realm. The original message harbored in this Platonistic picture is clearly that the vast and hardly graspable flux of appearances shelters something firm and invariable, something potentially fully capturable by human reason which can then use it as a prism to comprehend and understand the ever-changing phenomena. However, as I will claim, the picture of a 'higher' reality behind phenomena is dangerous in that it can delude a philosopher into feeling that he can solve empirical questions by a quasiempirical investigation of a non-empirical realm: a 'metaphysical reality'.

The fortunes of a fortune-teller

Let us, for a moment, forget about metaphysics and consider fortune-telling. A fortune-teller's prediction is supposed to spell out the future, how reality is to unfold. So what the fortune-teller (implicitly) claims, we may say, is the following:

$$\text{predicted event} = \text{real event} \quad (1)$$

However, any fortune-teller is likely to be at least minimally cautious in the sense that he would probably admit the possibility of 'disturbances' capable of making his prediction fail. The cautious fortune-teller's claim then would be:

^{*} This work was supported partly by the Research Support Scheme of the OSI/HESP, grant No. 280/1997 and partly by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, grant No. 401/99/0619.

$$\text{predicted event} + \text{disturbances} = \text{real event} \quad (2)$$

Now some fortune-tellers may exhibit more than caution - they may become so cunning as to try to make their predictions correct come what may. They may attempt to make the 'disturbances' in (2) into something which can justify *any* kind of discrepancy between their predictions and reality, i.e. to define, in effect,

$$\text{disturbances} = \text{real event} - \text{predicted event} \quad (3)$$

Needless to say that given (3), (2) reduces to the trivial

$$\text{real event} = \text{real event} \quad (4)$$

Suppose, e.g., that there is somebody who claims to be able to predict the sex of an unborn child (of course without using ultra-sound or other 'invasive' means)¹. Suppose that he claims that although his predictions sometimes fail due to some unpredictable disturbances, as a matter of fact he *can* see what is to happen. What could convince us to take him seriously, why should we not think that he is merely guessing? Surely one decisive reason would be if his predictions were successful to such an extent that this would not be explainable by mere chance, in this particular case if his predictions were correct in a number of cases which would 'statistically significantly' exceed fifty percent. In such a case we would probably accept, at least tentatively, that he was doing something over and above mere guessing. However, were this not the case, we would most likely be unwilling to say that what he was doing was real predicting; we would feel that he really made the disturbances-factor of his claim into a 'universal compensator' capable of neutralizing *any kind of* discrepancy between his predictions and real happenings - thus violating the Popperian maxim of falsifiability of contentful claims.

It is improbable that it would be of any help for the fortune-teller to insist that the reason why he should be taken seriously is that he possesses 'clairvoyance', the ability to see real things-to-happen (before they might get distorted by the alleged disturbances). Perhaps some centuries ago this indeed *might* have been accepted as a reason (there may even have existed allegedly decisive ways to decide whether someone was clairvoyant or not); however, with the development of modern science this has become simply obsolete. Now it is generally not believed that clairvoyance is an ability to be had (by a human creature).

The fortunes of a metaphysicians

The cunningness of the fortune-teller ridiculed above consisted in the fact that trying to present an observable phenomenon, O, as a sum of two factors, of something substantial, S, and some kind of disturbances, D:

$$O = S+D,$$

¹ In fact, predicting of this kind appears to have had quite a status in the first half of this century, at least in my country. Journals from that time are full of commercials like "I predict the sex of your child; guaranteed - I return money in case of failure!"

he made the disturbances into a ‘universal compensator’ which could neutralize any kind of discrepancy between S and O. Thus, he defined, in effect,

$$D = O-S,$$

which, of course, when substituted into the original equation, reduces it to the trivial tautology

$$O = O.$$

Now my point is that a metaphysician is in a somewhat similar position. What he seeks are some firm, eternal essences within (or ‘behind’) evasive phenomena. A worldly thing is then understood as the result of the dressing of an essence into worldly clothing; as an imperfect embodiment (‘methexis’) of the essence within a worldly body. Hence ‘the metaphysician’s claim’ can be articulated as

$$\text{essence} + \text{worldly ingredients} = \text{worldly thing}, \quad (5)$$

and we have an equation resembling the fortune-teller’s one. There is ‘something substantial’, in this case the essence, which gets modified by ‘disturbances’, in this case the worldly ingredients, resulting in what we can really observe. Moreover, in this case we obviously lack that possibility of justification which was available to the fortune-teller: we cannot take recourse to statistical significance, for we cannot record essences independently of the corresponding things to compute their covariances. Hence the only way for the metaphysician to argue for the nonvacuousness of his claim, to meet the challenge that the ‘worldly ingredients’ in his equation constitute a ‘universal compensator’ which makes *any* metaphysical claim trivially true, appears to be the one analogous to the fortune-teller’s claim to clairvoyance - in this case a claim to the ability to somehow ‘perceive essences’. And in fact this is what the metaphysicians indeed claimed: this ability is supposed to be our *intellectus*, which is able to ‘read inside’ things (‘intellectus’ = ‘intus legit’)².

True, the claim of being able to sort properties of things into ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ clearly makes more sense than the claim of being able to see the future. However, what I suggest is that the empirical spirit brought about by the boom of natural sciences at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century has eroded the intelligibility even of this claim. We perceive and record ‘worldly things’ and their properties - what should be a criterion of dividing the properties into those pertaining to the essence and those being merely accidental?

It is precisely the skepticism with respect to this division that underlies the famous rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction by Quine (1952). What we can observe is that something is this-and-so; but there is no observing, over and above this, that something is this-and-so *necessarily* or *essentially*, whereas something else is this-and-so only *contingently*

² Aquinas (1271-2, VI lect. 5 n. 1179) writes: „Dicitur autem intellectus ex eo quod intus legit intuyendo essentiam rei.“ [„The *intellectus* is so called because it reads inside when it perceives the essence of a thing.“]

or *accidentally*³. What Quine adds to this essentially Humean line of empiricist thought is that we cannot save the situation, as Carnap tried to do, by taking recourse to the rules of language - for the rules of a natural language are again 'worldly things' or aspects of 'worldly things', namely of the behavior of the speakers⁴.

All of this is not to be interpreted as implying the denial of the existence of *pragmatic* criteria for classifying properties of a thing into more and less 'essential' in the sense of being more interesting for us or more important for our current purposes. (Thus in the majority of cases it will be probably more important for us that someone is rational than that he is two-legged; or that something is carnivorous than that it is stripped.) However, we must remember that such a distinction is one of degree and cannot directly establishing a crisp dichotomy; and, in addition, that it is context- and purpose-dependent - what we find important and interesting clearly depends on circumstances and on the aims pursued.

The fortunes of a logical analysts

It might seem that metaphysics as envisaged above, is *de facto* something which has played no substantial role within this passing century's philosophy; and hence that we (together with the late Wittgenstein) are merely challenging a poor little strawman. After all, who still talks about essences and who bothers to argue whether having lungs belongs to the essence of a man? However, this is not true: what has been said above does not concern only those who refer to essences *in so many words* - it is applicable to all those who take empirical things to be based on non-empirical, 'mathematical' entities. And if within what we said above we substitute, e.g., *form* or *structure* for *essence*, we obtain claims which are far from obsolete.

Moreover, the claims of a metaphysician are not exhausted by statements claiming that the essence, or the structure, of something is this-and-so. It is felt that once we have gripped onto structures, we can also study their relationships; and thereby reveal the 'true' relationships between the things that have the structures. And as the world of structures is, unlike that of empirical phenomena, susceptible to a 'more geometrico' treatment, this appears to offer an inviting prospect.

In fact, logical analysis, as practiced by the partisans of analytic philosophy (with Russell's, 1905, celebrated analysis of definite descriptions as the paradigm) can readily be understood as this kind of a metaphysical enterprise. (Needless to say this is paradoxical, for many of the partisans employed it precisely with the expectancy that it would enable them to *dispense with* metaphysics⁵.) The point is that what logical analysis pursues is the genuine logical form hidden behind the surface form of an expression; and hence the logical analyst's claim, namely

³ Quine (1960, p. 199) claims: "Mathematicians can conceivably be said to be necessarily rational and not necessarily two-legged; and cyclists necessarily two-legged and not necessarily rational. But what of an individual who counts among his eccentricities both mathematics and cycling? Is this concrete individual necessarily rational and contingently two-legged or vice versa? Just insofar as we are talking referentially of the object, with no special bias towards a background grouping of mathematicians as against cyclists or vice versa, there is no semblance of sense in rating some of his attributes as important and others as contingent."

⁴ See also Wheeler (1986).

⁵ See, e.g., Carnap (1931).

logical form + 'imperfection' = real expression

(6)

is again of the form of (5): we see an observable entity, in this case a real expression, as a sum of two separately unobservable factors. Moreover, the character of one of the factors makes it tempting to make it into a 'universal compensator': it is easy to acquiesce in the feeling that doing logical analysis means inspecting 'abstract' logical forms, and that any question concerning whether a factual expression happens to have a particular logical form is to be left to empirical linguistics. (And should the task of associating natural language expressions with the logical forms thus studied turn out to be problematic, then the worse for natural language!)

Consider the picture of the language-world relationship as presented in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. According to this, the "substance" of the world is constituted by a collection of simple objects which are denoted by simple names constituting the foundation of language. However, nowhere in the whole book is there any hint as to how to find such simple objects within our factual world, nor how to reveal the simple names within our language. It seems that no real expression locatable within our language is really a simple name in the Wittgensteinian sense; yet Wittgenstein did not seem worried. Why should we care about the imperfections of our contingent language, when we aim higher, at non-contingent logical forms?

More recent instances of this attitude are numerous: formally-logical or formally-metaphysical analyses aspiring to be analyses of our factual language or our factual world, yet expecting to be able to accomplish this without leaving the realm of the formal. Let us mention at least one, exemplary case: when Kreisel (1967), in his celebrated paper, replaced the problem of the relationship between logical validity in the intuitive sense and model-theoretic validity with the problem of the relationship between two kinds of model-theoretical validity (namely the truth w.r.t. all the usually conceived model structures and the truth w.r.t. all model structures whatsoever), this has been almost universally accepted as an unproblematic move⁶.

Does this mean that logical analysis of language is an essentially misguided enterprise? Of course not - it is just a particular view of what logical analysis amounts to which is misguided, and which robs the analysis of its purported sense, namely to reveal the logical structure of the very language we are employing to make claims and argue for them. (Investigations of abstract forms are, to be sure, not necessarily *altogether* senseless - they can yield interesting *mathematical* results). What then is the alternative?

Two ways of understanding logical analysis

Elsewhere (see Peregrin, 1995, §11.9) I have pointed out that there are two principal approaches to the enterprise of logical analysis. First, there is the approach entertained by Russell, early Wittgenstein and their followers, according to which logical forms of expressions seem to be something quite definite and the task of logical analysis is to dig them from beneath the irregular delusive surface of language where they lie hidden. Contrasting with this is the approach of the late Wittgenstein and also of philosophers like Quine or Davidson: they propose, in effect, to see logic and logical analysis not in terms of prospecting for *the*

⁶ See also Peregrin (in prep.)

structure within the depths of language, but rather, we can say, in terms of building watchtowers over language to help us comprehend language and see *a* structure. In Wittgenstein's (1953, §132) words, "Wir wollen in unserem Wissen vom Gebrauch der Sprache eine Ordnung herstellen: eine Ordnung zu einem bestimmten Zweck; eine von vielen möglichen Ordnungen; nicht die Ordnung". In particular, as Davidson (1970, p. 140) puts it, "to give a logical form of a sentence is to give its logical location in the totality of sentences, to describe it in the way that explicitly determines what sentences it entails and what sentences it is entailed by."

If we adopt the latter vantage point, the situation of a logical analyst becomes similar not to that of an archeologist trying to dig out the layout of a buried city, but rather to that of somebody who is drawing a simplified plan of an existing city - which is open to view ("offen daliegt") - for the purposes of helping somebody to gain orientation within it, to familiarize himself with it ("sich auszukennen")⁷. Elsewhere (Peregrin, to appear) I have claimed that what this reflects is a general trait of human understanding, i.e. the fact that we humans tend to see complicated phenomena through the prisms of certain 'structures'. And here is where we can helpfully engage the distinction between Plato's "realm of Being" and his "realm of Becoming"; or, as I prefer to say, between *the realm of the formal* (RF) and *the realm of the natural* (RN).

How should we imagine the two realms? RN is the very realm of our 'physical' life, within which we can engage ourselves in *finding* and *describing*, but where everything appears to us as essentially *vague* and *fuzzy* (in the sense of not having a pure mathematical structure). Nothing regarding this realm can be *proven* in the mathematical sense. It can be seen as inhabited with things (in the prototypical sense of the word) and events, and prototypically it is the subject matter of natural science. Contrasting with this, within RF everything is precisely *defined* and sharply *delimited*; things are *stipulated* and facts about this world can be unambiguously *proven*. The inhabitants of this realm, with a certain amount of oversimplification, can be called *structures*; they are addressed most directly by mathematics⁸.

Using this terminology, we can say that the metaphysical conception of logic and logical analysis has come to rest on the assumption that logic deals with a peculiar realm located as if somewhere in the intersection of RF and RN - a realm comprising entities which are rigid and susceptible to mathematical treatment, and yet, at the same time, wield control of our factual reasoning. According to this view, the truths of logic are true independently of what is going on within the contingent world and yet they are somehow inherently related to the language we happen to use and to the way we, contingent beings, happen to think. Out contention, then, is that the existence of such a hybrid realm is a pernicious illusion: there is no intersection of RN and RF, for the constitutive properties of the two realms are mutually exclusive. *Something is rigid and susceptible to direct mathematical treatment only to the extent to which it is not part of what we normally called reality.*

It follows that the question whether a real thing can be reasonably seen as having this or another structure, or whether a structure can be helpfully 'projected' on this or that thing, is always an *empirical* one. Thus, proving something about a structure from RF can be taken as

⁷ Cf. Wittgenstein (1953, §§ 126, 123).

⁸ Needless to say that the talk about the two realms is itself not to be understood 'metaphysically', i.e. as a report of a discovery; but rather merely as an illustrious way of calling attention to the fact that our understanding crucially rests on an interplay of two essentially different levels.

proving something about a thing from RN *only if it is taken for granted that the thing has this structure* - which is something that, by its very nature, evades formal proof.

From this viewpoint the metaphysical conception of logic errs by misconstruing the relationship between RN and RF, namely by overlooking the fact that the nature of the two realms is essentially distinct. RN is the very world with which we are confronted, whereas RF is the realm of prisms we employ to reflect it and to understand it. The structures from RF serve as prisms through which we see and grasp the world, and which we may employ to explicitly reconstruct its regularities and to point out the 'forms' or 'structures' of things or events⁹.

The Error of Metaphysics

Our criticism of the metaphysical conception of logical analysis can now be generalized. It is obviously not capricious to seek rigid structures - or, if one wants, 'essences' - behind the elusive stream of phenomena which impinges on us; to try to, as the Ancients put it, "save the phenomena"¹⁰. On the contrary, it is the *conditio sine qua non* of our theoretical (and in fact also practical) coping with the world. In particular, it is clearly useful to see our language as embodying various kinds of structures, especially a 'logical' one. The basic point is that it is useful to investigate a thing via investigating its structure, for then what we are dealing with is a rigid unchangeable entity which can be subjected to the methods of mathematics, the most reliable scientific methods we have. Where this enterprise goes astray is when we start to take the pertinence of an essence to a thing to be itself an 'essential', non-empirical matter, and consequently treat the results of an investigation of the structure or essence as *eo ipso* concerning the original thing. In opposition to this, we stress that this is the case only provided the structure *really is the structure of the thing*, and that whether it really is *inevitably an empirical question*.

Thus, the pitfall of metaphysics, of which the late Wittgenstein warns us, is that it can easily mislead us, if we are too eager to 'look not at appearances, but rather to the (metaphysical) reality behind them', into understanding the philosophical enterprise as a direct, pseudo-empirical investigation of RF (= mathematical or quasi-mathematical structures) wholly bypassing the RN (= our real, everyday world). In this way one comes to mistake studying a prism for studying the world captured by the prism, and to devote oneself to the study of abstract ideas, categories or structures whilst losing from sight whether and how they really are relevant for our real world and our real problems. It is our "craving for generality", our "contemptuous attitude towards the particular case" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 17), that leads us astray - if it becomes excessive.

The price which the entities of the RF must pay for their 'crispness' and their consequent susceptibility to 'mathematical' treatment is that they are literally merely 'formal' (in the sense of being forms which must be filled by a content), that they, by themselves, cannot enter the factual, everyday world. Thus, the kind of metaphysics which I think we *should* depreciate - together with the late Wittgenstein - is the product of the illusion that we philosophers can somehow have our cake and eat it - that we can get hold of entities which

⁹ Cf. Stekeler-Weithofer (1994). For a more detailed treatment of these issues see Peregrin (to appear).

¹⁰ Cf. Mittelstraß (1962).

are *both* tractable in the rigorous, 'mathematical' vein *and* factual - that philosophy can 'calculate' truths of the real world.

References

- Aquinas, Thomas (1271-2) *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, printed in in *Opera omnia*, Vatican Polyglot Press, Rome, 1882.
- Carnap, R. (1931): 'Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache', *Erkenntnis* 2, 219-241.
- Davidson, D. (1970): 'Action and Reaction', *Inquiry* 13; reprinted in and quoted from Davidson (1980).
- Davidson, D. (1980): *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Mittelstraß, J. (1962): *Die Rettung der Phänomene*, Berlin.
- Peregrin, J. (1995): *Doing Worlds with Words*, Kluwer, Dordrecht.
- Peregrin, J. (to appear): 'The "Natural" and the "Formal"', *Journal of Philosophical Logic*.
- Peregrin, J. (in prep.): 'The "Fregean" Logic and the "Russellian" Logic', in preparation.
- Quine, W.V.O (1952): 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', *Philosophical Review* 60, 20-43; reprinted in Quine (1953).
- Quine, W.V.O. (1953): *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper and Row, New York.
- Quine, W.V.O. (1960): *Word and Object*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.).
- Russell, B. (1905): 'On denoting', *Mind* 14, 479-493.
- Stekeler-Weithofer, P. (1994): 'Ideation und Projektion', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 42, 757-960.
- Wheeler, Samuel C. III (1986): 'The Extension of Deconstruction', *Monist* 69, 3-21.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953): *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1956): *Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1958): *The Blue and Brown Books*, Blackwell, Oxford.