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Metaphysical Differences

Abstract: This paper addresses the disturbing phenomenon of fundamental, pervasive, and perennial dissent among the metaphysicians. As is shown in the paper, even some of the metaphysical opinions of the famous and very able metaphysician John Philosophus are far from compelling to other, no less able metaphysicians (and vice versa, of course). The apparently irreconcilable conflict of metaphysical opinions suggests the vanity of all metaphysics. However, this paper also points to a way in which metaphysics may nevertheless be worthwhile; it is, unfortunately, not the way in which John Philosophus does metaphysics.

It is an old complaint against metaphysics that the metaphysical views of the metaphysicians differ not only in less than fundamental respects but also *fundamentally*. They differ in fundamental respects – and by this I mean: they fundamentally contradict each other. There are more or less sophisticated arguments on both sides of every controversy in metaphysics, and most metaphysicians enjoy arguing, and enjoy winning an argument even more than arguing. This makes metaphysics seem vigorously alive. But to observers who manage to detach themselves at least for a while from their own stakes in metaphysics, the activities of the metaphysicians, whether in the past or in the present, can very well seem perfect illustrations of Ambrose Bierce’s general definition of *philosophy*: “a route of many roads leading from nowhere to nothing.”¹ If this were the truth of the matter, it would certainly be a tragic truth, since most metaphysicians – I take it – wish to travel the road to metaphysical truth, and not to *nothing*.

The endless clash of metaphysical opinions – usually without according intellectual justice to the opponent, always without a conclusive result once the dust has settled – can be frustrating and tiring. I hereby let you partake of my particular frustration. It’s just a mood. I am not always in the same mood.

I will consider metaphysical differences – differences of metaphysical opinion – on some metaphysical distinctions, that is, on *metaphysical differences* in another sense of the expression “metaphysical differences.” All controversies I will consider revolve around questions of the following form: Are all *F* (for example, all *beings*) *G*, or are some *F* not *G*? Are all *F* not *G*, or are some *F* *G*? All controversies I will consider are, in my view, intellectually unsatisfactory.

¹ Bierce (1999), p. 144.

Consider the famous metaphysician John Philosophus. This name is an alias; the person I designate by it is, in fact, among us.² I find using the alias helpful for keeping my personal sympathy for that person at a safe distance from my somewhat harsh philosophical criticism of some opinions of his. They are his opinions, but I could as well attack the metaphysical opinions of other philosophers, and other philosophers could as well attack mine and in doing so have the same general purpose that I have here. John Philosophus is simply the paradigmatic highly distinguished living metaphysician at the center of my paper – in which I wish to make a certain general point about *metaphysics*.

1 Philosophus on existence

Now, one of Philosophus's metaphysical opinions is this: "The category 'thing' comprises everything there is, everything that exists (for I take a stern anti-Meinongian line about non-existents: non-existents simply don't exist: the number of them is 0)."³ Many metaphysicians will applaud this view, others metaphysicians certainly won't. It is a minor – merely terminological – complaint against it that an ontological term which applies to *everything* – as the word "thing" does in the sense Philosophus accords to it – is not a category, but a so-called *transcendental*. The major issue is whether *everything there is* – in other words, *everything* – exists, as John Philosophus has it, or whether *not everything there is* – in other words, *not everything* – exists, as Alexius Meinong famously held. Now, I myself think that both philosophers are right: it all depends on whether you conceptually identify being and existence, as Philosophus does, or conceptually distinguish being and existence, as Meinong did. If being and existence are conceptually the same, then it is trivially true that everything there is exists – there is nothing particularly robust, staunch or *stern* in having this opinion (contrary to what Philosophus seems to think). If, however, being and existence are not the same conceptually, if existence means *actuality*, as Meinong believed, then it is false that everything there is exists, for it is simply false that everything there is is *actual*. For example, some states of affairs *are*, but are not actual; take the state of affairs that the moon is larger than the earth. Some properties *are*, but are not actual; take the property of being a flying unicorn. Even some individuals, or in

² The original character of this paper is that of a speech (and as a speech it was originally presented). The paper's original character has been preserved in its printed version.

³ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 199.

another word: particulars, are, but are not actual; for example, someone who is not actual but might have been actual instead of me, someone who never was born and never will be born but might have been born to my parents instead of me.

Unfortunately, metaphysicians are prone to insist that their own opinions are right, that the opinions of opposing metaphysicians are wrong to the point of absurdity. They are not fond of irenic resolutions of their differences; they like to win. We cannot be quite sure in this respect about Alexius Meinong, who, after all, has been dead for quite a while, but I have a hunch that John Philosophus, even with the distinction between being and actuality in place, would still insist that Meinong was simply and absurdly wrong. If I may put some words into his mouth: “I have no idea what you mean by actuality as distinct from being. To the extent that I can understand the term ‘actuality’, it is synonymous with ‘being’.” Would it help if one pointed out that the state of affairs that the moon is larger than the earth *has being* – because it is (identical to) something – *but lacks actuality* – that is, *existence, in one of the legitimate senses of this word* – because it does not obtain? Would it help if one pointed out that the property of being a flying unicorn *has being* – because it is something – *but lacks actuality* – that is, *existence, in one of the legitimate senses of this word* – because it is not exemplified by anything actual? It might help, but I strongly doubt that it would help. As David Lewis once remarked, “Any competent philosopher who does not understand something will take care not to understand anything else whereby it might be explained.”⁴ And John Philosophus is certainly a very competent philosopher, indeed a formidably competent philosopher.

It is not unlikely that in reaction to the suggested modestly Meinongian attempts to convince him of the existence of the nonexistent, or to say it in a less Meinongian, *less playful manner*:⁵ to convince him of the fact that some things do not exist – that in reaction to these attempts John Philosophus would sternly reject the idea that there is more than one legitimate sense to the word “existence”; there is just one sense, he is likely to insist, according to which sense existence is conceptually identical with being. And consequently (according to Philosophus), since *every thing is*, no thing does not exist, or in other words (accepting the all-

⁴ Lewis (1986), p. 203.

⁵ Meinong wrote: “Who is fond of paradoxical ways of expression could, therefore, very well say: objects exist of which it is true that such objects do not exist” (Meinong (1988), p. 9; my translation). The second part of this quotation (the part after the colon) is known as “Meinong’s Shocker.” One usually ignores the first part of the quotation where Meinong is clearly implying that (what came to be known as) “Meinong’s Shocker” is merely a rhetorical, *playfully paradoxical way* of putting his central thesis.

encompassing sense Philosophus accords to the word “thing”): since *everything* is, nothing does not exist; and therefore, Meinong, who held that some things do not exist, is in error, absurdly in error.

I am not saying that to argue *like this* is wrong, but I do say that it is *arbitrary* and that it says nothing whatsoever against Meinong. Consider that many metaphysicians have believed that being itself is not univocal. Aristotle, for one, writes in Book IV of the *Metaphysics*, 1009 a (my translation): “For being is said in two senses, such that in the one sense something can come into being from non-being, but in the other sense it cannot.” Yes, indeed, something can become *actual* from not being actual, but nothing can become *something* – that is, identical with something – from not being anything – that is, from not being identical with anything. Thus, Aristotle distinguishes two senses of being, one according to which *being* is *being actual*, another according to which *being* is *being something*. Believe me, Aristotle certainly believed that *some things are not actual*, and he certainly did not believe that some things are nothing; on the contrary, he believed that *every thing is something*. Now, Alexius Meinong identifies the meaning of the word “exist”, which word (of Scholastic origin) was quite unknown to Aristotle, with *being actual*. Thus, Meinong says (or would have said in English), “Some things do not exist”, or more dramatically, “Some things there are which do not exist”, where Aristotle would have said, “Some things are not actual”. Where, then, is the problem? Both philosophers hold what is logically the same, but Meinong alone, as we all know, gets the big howl, the derision, and the sneers – for no good reason.

John Philosophus, in turn, identifies the meaning of the word “exist” – which word, I repeat, was unknown to Aristotle – with *being something*. Thus, Philosophus says, “Every thing exists,” or more dramatically, “Every thing there is exists”, where Aristotle would have said, “Every thing is something”. What Philosophus and Aristotle hold is logically the same, and what they hold is quite true, indeed, *trivially* true; but it says nothing whatsoever against Meinong; for Meinong was far from denying that every thing is something. If one asserted that *everything is actual* – well, then, indeed, one would be saying something against Meinong (and against Aristotle). But one would also be saying something which is false.

I am afraid John Philosophus will disagree. Perhaps Meinong and Philosophus will meet some day, and a higher authority will tell them who is right? In the meantime, I find the thought attractive that just like some people are actual who might not have been actual, so, by ontological symmetry, some people are not actual who might have been actual. They stay forever unactualized in the mind of God – who does not forget them and what they might have been and done if they had been actualized.

2 Philosophus on categories

I turn to another controversy. Many of John Philosophus's fellow materialists – notably, Jaegwon Kim and Donald Davidson – believe in *events*. There are also dualists who believe in events. I do. But John Philosophus does not believe in events, although he is somewhat tentative about this, as can be seen in the following quotation: “If, as I’d prefer to think, there are no events, if there are only substances and relations, then there is no thesis that can properly be called the identity theory.”⁶ Now, the conditional I just quoted is just false. Here is a thesis that can properly be called the thesis of the (token) identity-theory: “Every mental event is a physical event.” This thesis obviously exists (both in Philosophus's and in Meinong's sense), no matter whether there are events or not. And if there were indeed no events, then this thesis would even turn out to be true, trivially true. What more can an identity theorist wish for? Many identity theorists will admit, though, that their thesis would turn out to be true not quite in the way they expect if there were no events.

However, what should really interest us here is, of course, something else: it is what Philosophus says he'd prefer to think: that there are no events. I don't know why anyone would prefer to think that there are no events. Ordinary language provides us with general and singular terms for events: “war” and “World War I,” “assassination” and “the assassination of President Lincoln,” “birth” and “the birth of Christ,” “revolution” and “the French Revolution,” “explosion” and “the supernova observed in 1054 A. D.” We have idioms for characterizing events as actual or as non-actual: once an actual event is over, we say that it *happened*, or *took place*, or *ran its course*. If an event happened, it is an actual event. In contrast, the moon-landing of 1964 is an event that did not happen; it is a non-actual event, and so is the Coming of Christ in 2000 A. D. Note that we (or most of us) are quite ready to admit that there are non-actual events of the following stripe: events whose times – the times for them to happen – lie in the past and which simply did not happen.

John Philosophus would prefer to think that all of this sophisticated but entirely *ordinary* conceptual apparatus (which children master as soon as they can look forward to their *birthdays*) is good for nothing, since, as he says, he'd prefer to think that there are no events. What is such a negative attitude good for? It quite escapes me.

⁶ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 210.

Philosophus moves from being tentatively to being boldly negative when he says: “Even if there are mental events, I say, there are no pains.”⁷ This I have also heard from a fanatically devoted Wittgensteinian: from Peter Hacker. Whatever John and Peter say, there certainly *seem* (to everyone alive) *to be* pains, and they *seem to be* mental events of a special sort: subjective events. Why not say that there *are* pains and that they *are* subjective events? Other feelings besides pains are also subjective events. And sensations, dreams, hallucinations, episodes of thinking, episodes of strenuous willing, episodes of melancholy, episodes of listlessness, episodes of joy, episodes of religious emotion, temporal stretches of visual perception, temporal stretches of tactile perception, and so on – all of these are subjective events. Subjective events, insofar as they belong to *one* subject of experience, constitute the stream of consciousness of that subject of experience, its so-called *inner world* (or *inner life*). It is a very rich world, and for more than a century now not only psychologists but also philosophers have been willing (even eager) to explore it and describe it. The philosophical discipline devoted to this task is called “Phenomenology”; it was inaugurated by Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl. Judging from his dismissal of pains, I am afraid John Philosophus will also dismiss all other subjective events, and therewith Phenomenology. If so, the only comment I have is that this is philosophically regrettable – regrettable from the *rational* point of view.

How could one convince someone who says that there are no pains that there are pains after all? It is very simple: pinch him where it hurts. But short of such drastic measures, which might land one in jail, the only method is to point out that our common discourse does strongly suggest that there are pains. Now, John Philosophus does not wish to be misunderstood: “I am not saying that if there are no events the eliminativists or the behaviorists are right. If there are no events, I contend, the mental is nevertheless real. For, even if there are no events, it is nevertheless true that some things think and have feelings. They really do have those properties. That they have those properties is as real and objective a feature of the world as anything is.”⁸ Well, I am glad to hear this. Philosophus’s position seems to be that the event discourse about the mental – in particular, the event discourse about pain – can be wholly replaced by a substance-and-relation discourse about the mental (properties being counted as 1-term relations), without any significant loss. Perhaps the former discourse can indeed be wholly replaced by the latter, I am not sure; but even if this could be done, it would not mean that there are no pains, let alone that there are no mental events. For one thing, not mention-

⁷ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 210.

⁸ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 210.

ing something just does not mean that there is no such thing. For another thing, the event discourse about pain is just as likely to be able to wholly replace the substance-and-relation discourse about pain, without any significant loss, as it is likely to be the other way around. This point can be illustrated by a story:

Ludwig – or Peter, or John – goes to the doctor. Sticking to his convictions not only in theory but also in practice, he is careful not to use the language of pain-events. He says to the doctor: “I am in pain with respect to my head and my stomach; moreover, I am in pain with respect to my left big toe.” The doctor, who is without Ludwig’s ontological scruples, jots down: “The patient complains about pains in the head, in the stomach, and in the left big toe.” Then the doctor asks Ludwig: “How long have the stomach-ache, the headache and the pain in the big toe been going on? Do you have any idea what caused these pains? Did you already do something to make them go away?” Clearly, the doctor is using the language of pain-events – which language is anathema to Ludwig. Ludwig (or Peter, or John) pontificates: “I say, there are no pains.” Imagine the amazement of the doctor.

This (fictitious) anecdote is *not* a fable for illustrating Bishop Berkeley’s famous maxim: that we should think with the learned and speak with the vulgar. Its real message is that Ludwig is simply wrong (as are Peter and John): If Ludwig is in pain with respect to his head, his stomach and his left big toe, then there are, indeed, three pains – three (actual) pain-events – of which Ludwig is the subject: one in his head, one in his stomach, and one in his left big toe. And the converse is also true: If Ludwig is the subject of three pains: one in his head, one in his stomach and one in his left big toe, then Ludwig is in pain with respect to his head, his stomach, and his left big toe. The language of substances and relations in talking about pain is not privileged over the language of events; and vice versa, the language of events in talking about pain is not privileged over the language of substances and relations.

What does this linguistic fact suggest with respect to ontology? It strongly suggests that there are not only substances which are in pain but also pains, and, of course, it also suggests that there are not only pains but also substances which are in pain. Will this reconciliatory offer be accepted by John Philosophus, *or* by those other metaphysicians who, in diametrical opposition to John Philosophus, believe that there are *no substances*, hence no substances in pain; who believe that there are, as far as pain is concerned, only pain-events and their properties – of which the most important one is the property *being a pain* itself, with its species: being a headache, being a stomach-ache, being a toothache, being a toe-ache, and so on? My hopes for reconciliation among the metaphysicians are, in fact, infinitesimally small. For one thing, metaphysicians are not fond of reconciliation; they want to be victorious. For another thing – and this is a much more serious problem than the, perhaps narcissistic, opinionatedness philosophers so often display – the

majority of metaphysicians is enamored with monism: they have fallen for monism, they are fascinated by its alleged beauty; they covet the *one*-category ontology, they passionately desire existence to be univocal. However, the father of systematic metaphysics, Aristotle, was free from this infatuation with monism, was far from being a monist. “*To on pollachos legetai*” – “Being is said in many ways” is a dictum repeated over and over by Aristotle, and is repeated after him by Thomas Aquinas: “*Ens multipliciter dicitur.*”

Willard van Orman Quine, in contrast, who has done much to reinstate metaphysics on the stage of contemporary thought, wants the landscape of ontology to be a desert landscape – not a Brazilian jungle, not an English garden (like the one in Munich), not a mountainous American, Polish or German woodland; Quine writes: “Wyman’s [that is, Quine’s philosophical dummy’s] overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes.”⁹ This is not humor, this, to my mind, is chilly superciliousness, and it leaves one with the eerie feeling that Quine’s aesthetics is an aesthetics of death and dearth. Aren’t we lucky, aren’t we *blessed* that God is – also in this respect – not like Quine?

What about John Philosophus? Well, his universe looks even more lifeless than Quine’s. John Philosophus’s universe is a strange one in appearance. Look around you. What do you perceive? According to the metaphysical views of John Philosophus and many other philosophers, *you perceive nothing at all*. There are substances, of course, according to Philosophus, which have properties and stand in relations to one another, and which change, that is, lose old properties and gain new ones, move out of old relations with other substances and enter into new ones. But, according to Philosophus, all the properties and relations involved are abstract entities. The abstractness of properties gets special emphasis; Philosophus says: “It should be evident that properties, as I use the term, are as abstract as anything could be. They can in no way be ‘constituents’ (whatever that might mean) of concrete objects.”¹⁰ Abstractness of properties and relations means (among other things) that you cannot perceive them, not a single one of them; and this means that you cannot perceive that substances *have properties*, and *lose and gain properties*, or that substances *stand in relations*, and *move out of and into relations*. You cannot perceive this – because properties and relations are, according to John Philosophus, *abstract* entities. For illustration, note that there is *money in the concrete* – bills and coins – and *money in the abstract* – symbolized by certain figures on your bank statement. Money in the concrete you

⁹ Quine (2004), p. 179.

¹⁰ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 202.

can perceive, visually or otherwise, and you can perceive, visually or otherwise, that somebody *has* money, *gains* money, *loses* money in the concrete. But money in the abstract you cannot perceive, and you cannot perceive that somebody *has*, or *gains*, or *loses* money in the abstract; you can only infer, given appearances and your knowledge of the ways of the world, that a given person has, gains, or loses money in the abstract.

If assuming that properties and relations are abstract entities still does not seem to you to force you to conclude that all changes of substances in their properties and relations is unperceivable, just as all their having of properties and standing in relations is unperceivable, then you should recall that Philosophus does not believe in events and states of affairs. He declares:

First, there is only one kind of concrete object: that which has traditionally been called ‘substance’ or ‘individual thing’.¹¹ And there is only one type of abstract object. I will call this one type ‘relation’. [...] Among relations there are 0-term relations, or propositions, 1-term relations (also called properties [...]), and 2-or-more-term relations, which I will call ‘proper relations’ (on the model of proper fractions and proper subsets).¹²

And John Philosophus adds:

[S]ince, in my view, there are only substances and relations, there are no tropes or immanent universals. [...] [A]s far as I can see, the term ‘trope’ (as used by philosophers), and the term ‘immanent universal’ are perfectly meaningless.¹³

It always astonishes me how quick philosophers are to declare to be “perfectly meaningless” what other philosophers think, especially if it contradicts their own opinions. If metaphysicians resort to speaking like the inveterate enemies of all metaphysics – the logical empiricists – spoke, then this does not bode well for philosophy, and in particular for metaphysics. In any case, it should be clear from the quoted passages that John Philosophus has no proper place in his ontology for events and states of affairs, although, as we have seen, he can be somewhat tentative about events. Note that states of affairs are not propositions; “Propositions are things that have truth-values”, says John Philosophus.¹⁴ States of affairs do not

¹¹ It must be noted that not even traditionally *substance* and *individual thing* have been the same category. For example, traditionally so-called *individual accidents* are traditionally not substances, though they are individuals and hence individual things (in Philosophus’s wide sense of the word “thing”).

¹² Van Inwagen (2007), pp. 200–201.

¹³ Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

have truth-values; they obtain and are facts, or do not obtain and are non-facts (or, as some Americans nowadays like to say, “alternative facts”).¹⁵ Now, every having of a property and standing in a relation is a state of affairs; every change in properties, every change in relations is an event. So, under Philosophus’s assumption that there are no states of affairs and no events, there is nothing there for you to perceive when you look around you¹⁶ – *except, perhaps, substances whose states and changes you cannot perceive?* But substances whose states and changes you cannot perceive are substances you cannot perceive. Thus, according to the metaphysical views of John Philosophus, when you look around you, *you perceive nothing at all*, as I said – which consequence constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of some of the metaphysical views of John Philosophus.

Will this impress John Philosophus? Not him, I’m afraid. If worse comes to worst, perception will be just another mystery for John Philosophus; he tells his readers: “I’m a metaphysician and am inured to mystery.”¹⁷ Perhaps he should better have said: “I’m a metaphysician and am inured to absurdity.” He would be in illustrious company: a long series of great metaphysicians, beginning with

¹⁵ They are also *less fine-grained* than propositions: the *state of affairs* that John sits to the right of Peter is numerically identical to the *state of affairs* that Peter sits to the left of John; but the *proposition* that John sits to the right of Peter is numerically different from the *proposition* that Peter sits to the left of John. The same point can be made with respect to the state of affairs, respectively proposition, that ABC is an equiangular triangle and the state of affairs, respectively proposition, that ABC is an equilateral triangle (or the state of affairs, respectively proposition, that Harry loves Sally and the state of affairs, respectively proposition, that Sally is loved by Harry). Note that “that”-phrases are complex singular terms which are systematically ambiguous with respect to their object of reference: a certain proposition, *or* the state of affairs uniquely determined by that proposition. (And note: different propositions may determine the *same* state of affairs, as has just been amply illustrated.)

¹⁶ “I perceive that I have two legs” is a perfectly normal sentence, and a sentence I can verify directly by perception (of which I am conscious): I perceive (and am conscious of perceiving) the following *concrete* state of affairs: *my having two legs*, in other words, my having the *concrete* property *being two-legged* (or *having two legs*). But what does John Philosophus make of “I perceive that I have two legs”? He could treat “that I have two legs” as the logical object of “I perceive” and as designating *the proposition that I have two legs*; but this renders the sentence in question false, necessarily false; for propositions – being abstract objects – cannot be perceived by anyone. Philosophus must resort to an adverbial construal of “I perceive that I have two legs”: “I am being I-two-leggy veridically appeared to” (and “I perceive that *he* has two legs” becomes “I am being *he*-two-leggy veridically appeared to”). This is certainly not what natural language and the phenomenology of intentional consciousness suggest. I am not saying that the adverbial construal of perception-sentences is wrong, but it seems to me *arbitrary*, an arbitrary, grotesque, and entirely unnecessary contortion.

¹⁷ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 201.

Heraclitus and Parmenides, including, near its (current) end, David Lewis and David Armstrong.¹⁸

The title of this conference is *Quo vadis, Metaphysics?* A serious question, indeed! A *First Philosophy* whose exponents flout the natural ontology of natural language, are madly in love with monism or unduly fascinated by revisionary radicalism; a *First Philosophy* whose exponents forever contradict each other, and forever argue one against the other, tacitly or not so tacitly intellectually contemning each other – where, in the words of David Lewis, “[o]ne man’s reason is another man’s *reductio*”¹⁹ – *such a First Philosophy* is, it would seem to me, hardly *in* or *on* a good way. Where are you going, Metaphysics? From nothing to nowhere? From nowhere to nothing? I hope not.

3 Somewhat brighter perspectives

I must not allow this paper to end without suggesting a road away from “the highway to nothing,” away from the mere clash of opinions where the, *for the moment*, strongest arguer (by dint of a quick intelligence and ready eloquence) will usually prevail – *for the moment*, but always not for long. I propose that we must, first of all, avoid gratuitous denials of entities (such as, the denial that there are subjective events, in particular, pains, or the denial that there are inanimate material objects). That there are arguments for such denials is, in itself, not enough rational justification for (seriously) proposing the denials (not as hypotheses to play with, but as something really to believe in), let alone for accepting them (in all seriousness): Where there are arguments, there are, or will be, counter-arguments, and where there is a smart arguer, there is, or will be, an equally smart or smarter counter-arguer. *What there is* is, it seems to me, not a matter of “who is the smartest of them all.”

But *what should* – and, therefore, *could* – each one of us metaphysicians *do* other than argue – always unsuccessfully in the long run, no matter how smart we are – on the basis of his or her basic convictions (which, unfortunately, con-

¹⁸ What is absurd in the opinions of these great philosophers? Well, Heraclitus thought that everything moves, Parmenides thought that nothing moves, David Lewis thought that what *he can do* has something to do with what some counterpart of his does in some other possible world, and David Armstrong thought that he can have a perfect ontology of modality while being a perfect actualist. (For a detailed criticism of Armstrong’s and Lewis’s philosophies of modality, see my book *The Theory of Ontic Modalities*.)

¹⁹ Lewis (1986), p. 207.

tradict those of other metaphysicians) for his or her non-basic convictions (which, in their turn, contradict those of other metaphysicians)? This is what we should do: We should accept a common evidential basis and a common methodology. The evidential basis is ready at hand: natural language (including its many specializations, among them the language of science), which is the objective – hence intersubjectively available – mirror of human consciousness (which is the mirror of the world).²⁰ And the first methodological precept (besides the pledge of allegiance to logic) should be this: *Preserve as much of the prima facie ontology of natural language as is logically possible.*

Having said this much, I realize that it is a dream which is humanly impossible to realize – like Husserl’s dream of philosophy “als strenge Wissenschaft [as a strict science].”²¹ In *basic* matters, we humans tend to disagree fundamentally, even against the deliverances of natural language, which is, moreover, far from deciding everything that pertains to the *basic* matters. Having 2500 years of endless and heated philosophical conflict behind us, I have no hopes that this situation will ever change (as long as human history remains essentially *human* history). This means: I have no hopes that – external pressure (politics, religion, fashion) aside – *one* system of metaphysical propositions will ever be accepted by *all* metaphysicians, indeed, not even by the best metaphysicians.

What, therefore, should we metaphysicians do? The second-best thing to do – since the best is infeasible – is to accept *metaphysical pluralism*. Metaphysical pluralism is something else than metaphysical relativism, for under metaphysical pluralism the belief in objective metaphysical truth is being retained. In particular, every metaphysician is allowed to believe that his or her “system” tells the objective metaphysical truth (more or less completely), provided the system is logically consistent and has a sufficiently clear interpretation (whether a metaphysician is right in that belief is, of course, quite a different matter). Everything can stay as it is now, *with two significant exceptions*: (1) Inflammatory (eristic, polemical) language – like calling the opinions of others “perfectly meaningless” – must be strictly avoided. (2) The aim of debate must not be victory but finding, and stating as clearly as possible, the fundamental point of disagreement. Sometimes *no* such point will be found; then nothing stands in the way of fundamental agree-

20 What is called “ordinary language philosophy” is not the philosophy of ordinary language, not a philosophy of what ordinary speakers mean and ostensibly refer to when using ordinary language; it is an enterprise driven by anti-metaphysical ideology (which appears, on a closer look, not anti-metaphysical after all, but in the secret service of the metaphysics of scientistic naturalism).

21 See Husserl (2009), first published in 1911.

ment (about the particular point at issue). If, however, the fundamental point of disagreement is found, then all that remains is this: to agree to disagree, to agree to differ (in as clear a way as possible).

The effect of obeying these two imperatives will, indeed, not be the emergence of one unified consistent and comprehensive system of a pluralistic metaphysics – a system *e pluribus (categoriis et modis entium) unum*, a system into which all (professionally serious) metaphysicians invest their work (so that the system is *e pluribus unum* also in this other sense). Such a feat of human intellectual cooperation is beyond the pale of (merely) human possibility.²² Rather, the effect will be the emergence of many unified consistent systems of metaphysics side by side, all of which are accepted by only some metaphysicians – sometimes by only one metaphysician. Some (many) of these systems will stand in logical conflict with one another; but since the nature of the conflict is clear in each case, and the conflict is without heat in each case,²³ this outcome – *metaphysical pluralism* – is the second-best outcome after the one outcome which is best but humanly unattainable (i.e., the all-encompassing and universally agreed on *e-pluribus-unum* system). The benefit to the general public – which, being human, craves metaphysics (sometimes more, sometimes less) – will still be great, since the general public is given – *not*, indeed, what the experts have agreed on is the metaphysical truth, but – what the experts have agreed on are crystal-clear and consistent fundamental alternatives in the quest for metaphysical truth (the existence of which truth is, *emphatically*, not denied). This is still helpful and a great gift of rationality, especially since it is accompanied by the following caveat: “We, collectively, do not know the metaphysical truth. But as individuals, some of us may indeed know it.” Yes, indeed: some of us may know it. After all, whosoever is drawn into

²² Not only a universally accepted comprehensive system of presumed metaphysical truths is humanly infeasible, humanly infeasible is also a universally accepted comprehensive system of metaphysics which is (in the eyes of all metaphysicians) maximally coherent with the non-metaphysical aspects of presumed human knowledge. (This is easily seen: A comprehensive system of metaphysics should either include the proposition that God exists, or the proposition that God does not exist. But is the proposition that God exists more coherent with the non-metaphysical aspects of presumed human knowledge than its negation, or is it less coherent? This question, I submit, will forever – at least until the Last Day – stay moot among the metaphysicians.)

²³ Obeying the two aforementioned imperatives will certainly result in there being less “fun” in metaphysical debates. But the kind of excitement that will be lacking (it can also be had from athletic contests or from chess games, as a participant in one way, as a spectator in another) is the kind of “fun” that we, as philosophers, should do without, at least in our professional lives. *We, as philosophers, are not and should not like to be gladiators, and we are not and should not like to be spectators of gladiators.*

the vortex of metaphysics, will, after a while (after reflection and getting older), not less firmly but ever more firmly uphold his or her metaphysical convictions, and these convictions may in fact – by chance, fate, or by the will of God – all be right, put together side by side: in conjunction; and many of them may, moreover, have been argued for in a rationally satisfactory manner (but note: it is rationally impossible to argue for every conviction one has). All of this may be the case, although there is not – nor, in all likelihood, ever will be – a corporate agreement among the metaphysicians to accept some particular metaphysical system. Thus, here they are: the disparate metaphysical convictions of the metaphysicians; here they are for us to accept a selection of them – if head and heart so dispose us – thoughtfully, coherently, clearly seeing the pros and cons. It is true: if metaphysics gets into contact with morality and religion (and this can hardly be avoided), the fire of polemical contest, which I wish to see extinguished in metaphysics, tends to flare up uncontrollably (sometimes leading not only to mental violence). But *metaphysical pluralism*, in the sense I described it, can be expected to soften even this rather unfortunate psychological effect – *if metaphysical pluralism is taken to heart*.

4 Appendix

(1) Castañeda on philosophical method

I am grateful to Francesco Orilia for drawing my attention to Hector-Neri Castañeda's book from the year 1980, *On Philosophical Method*. In some regards, I agree with what Castañeda says there; in other regards, I don't. Here is a regard in which I wholeheartedly agree with him (and how could one not agree with him in this regard?):

In sum, *the philosophical given for each philosopher is the totality of his diverse experiences and the whole of each of his thinking idiolects with its syntactico-semantic contrasts: experience and language united in an organic whole.*²⁴

This is true. But although we all live in one world and, as speakers of English, all speak one language, there does not appear to be a convergence between our experiences and thinking idiolects, at least none that is sufficient for establishing the philosophical – in particular, metaphysical – system we all agree upon (and would have every reason to believe true). On the contrary, philosophers dia-

²⁴ Castañeda (1980), p. 47; italics in the original.

chronically and synchronically produce a plurality of incompatible metaphysical (hence philosophical) systems. And Castañeda is perfectly aware of this. He even thinks that this peculiar “state of the art” is as it should be and, in fact, could and should still be improved:

The most crucial and urgent need of our time is *a plurality of comprehensive philosophical systems based on rich, complex, and abundant data all carefully analyzed*. Only a vital philosophical pluralism can prepare the way for *dia-philosophy*.²⁵

Again, I wholeheartedly agree. However, Castañeda believes that an interesting *dia-philosophy* is (at least) possible; I do not believe that an interesting *dia-philosophy* is possible. What is *dia-philosophy*?

The ultimate aim is the comparative study of maximal theories in order to establish, through isomorphisms among them, a system of invariances [sic]. Such comparisons and the establishment of such isomorphisms and invariances is *dia-philosophy*. Naturally, we can at present have only *dia-philosophical* glimmers. The fully worked out systems of the future may, perhaps, give rise to systematic *dia-philosophy*.²⁶

It is trivially true that differing systems will also have something in common. But if two systems not only differ, but are also *incompatible*, then it is likely that what they have in common is fairly trivial – therefore *uninteresting* – from the philosophical point of view. And the likelihood that the commonalities of two incompatible systems are philosophically trivial increases with the fundamentality of the disagreements between them. Unfortunately, the disagreements between incompatible metaphysical systems are very often (not always, I grant) *very fundamental*. What *metaphysically interesting* commonalities, for example, might there be between the metaphysical system of John Philosophus, for whom *actual substances* are the concrete basic objects and there are many basic kinds of abstract object, and the metaphysical system of another (also very real) metaphysician, for whom *actual and merely possible eventlike particulars* are the concrete basic objects and sets constitute the only basic kind of abstract object? It is certainly hard to see any metaphysically interesting commonalities between these two systems. Since it is unthinkable to exclude either one of the two systems (or both) from metaphysics or from philosophy, their very existence seems to demonstrate the impossibility of *dia-philosophy*. Philosophical pluralism and, in particular, metaphysical pluralism appear to be quite *unmitigable*.

²⁵ Castañeda (1980), p. 20; italics in the original.

²⁶ Castañeda (1980), p. 15; italics in the original.

(2) An argument of John Philosophus's

John Philosophus puts much stock in arguments (in fact, he can seem to argue *incessantly*). One should emulate him only to a certain extent, since, in truth, it is the propositions that ultimately matter in philosophy and, in particular, in metaphysics, not the arguments. After all, every argument starts with a proposition (usually, this initial proposition is a conjunction of propositions), and ends with a proposition.²⁷ No argument can make the proposition argued for – the conclusion of the argument – more believable than the argument's premise: the proposition (usually, conjunction of propositions) on the basis of which the conclusion is argued. It is, therefore, a very usual reaction to a logically sound argument simply to disbelieve its premise – as much as, or more than, one disbelieves its conclusion. And as long as metaphysicians do not commit themselves to an intersubjectively binding basis of metaphysical knowledge, *disbelieving the premise* will always be a perfectly rational countermove to any metaphysical argument whatsoever.

But here is an argument of John Philosophus's, an argument that founders already for purely logical reasons (so that *disbelieving the premise* is not necessary for disarming it, but certainly can be helpful for this purpose nonetheless); it is an argument that concerns "Cartesian unionism": the doctrine that the human person ("I") is a "union or amalgam or whole" of *mens* (or *anima*) and *corpus*:

If Cartesian unionism is true, I am not the immaterial thing that Descartes calls my *mens* or *anima*. Suppose my body were annihilated and no new body replaced it. What would happen to me according to Cartesian unionism? Only one answer is possible: I should cease to exist, for, now that my body has been destroyed, there is no candidate for the office 'I' but my *mens*, or the *mens* that was formerly mine. And my *mens* can't be I, since it used *not* to be I – and, as we all know nowadays (I hope we all know this), if *x* is not identical with *y*, *x* is necessarily not identical with *y*.²⁸

Regimenting the suppositions of this argument, we obtain:

(Proposition 1) My body does not now exist, nor any replacement for it. (Let us suppose my body has been annihilated without replacement.)

(Proposition 2) If I now exist and my body does not now exist, nor any replacement for it, then I am now my *mens*. (Given the antecedent of this conditional, there is now no other entity than my *mens* for me to be identical to.)

²⁷ Indirect arguments constitute a special case. The premise of an indirect argument is the conjunction of its initial propositions *without its assumption for reductio*. The conclusion of such an argument is not its final proposition, the proposition with which it ends, but *the negation of its assumption for reductio*.

²⁸ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 205; all italics are already in the original.

(Proposition 3) In the past, I was not my *mens*. (This is how Cartesian unionists – but certainly not only Cartesian unionists – would have it.)

Philosophus believes that the conjunction of these three propositions entails the following conclusion: *I do not now exist*.

Does this entailment really obtain? Philosophus seems to argue like this: Since in the past I was not my *mens* (according to proposition 3), I am necessarily not my *mens* (using the negative part of what one might term “Kripke’s Law”: that negative part is cited in full in the last quotation above²⁹), and hence (as a logical consequence) I am now not my *mens*. Therefore (making use of proposition 2 [and elementary propositional logic]), I do not now exist, or my body or a replacement for it now exists. Therefore (making use of proposition 1 [and elementary propositional logic]), *I do not now exist*.

Philosophus seems to think that this result constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of Cartesian unionism *qua a form of dualism*, since, *as a form of dualism*, it must be taken to imply that the current non-existence of my body, even without a replacement for it, does not rule out my current existence.³⁰ Now, such a strong stipulation concerning the semantic content of “dualism” (that is, “psycho-physical dualism”) can very well be made; I, for one, have no quarrel with it. However, the argument itself contains a serious logical problem: “I am necessarily not my *mens*” does not (does not *without further ado*) follow from “In the past, I was not my *mens*.” It would indeed follow if both “I” and “my *mens*” were *rigid designators* across times and possible worlds (their being such designators would be a sufficient condition for their instantiating Kripke’s Law, and hence for applying Kripke’s Law); “I”, as used by anyone, is indeed a rigid designator across times and possible worlds; but for “my *mens*” it is reasonably doubtful that it is a rigid designator across times and possible worlds.³¹ If it is *not* such a designator (and it

²⁹ The negative (second) part of *Kripke’s Law*: If *x* is not identical with *y*, *x* is necessarily not identical with *y*. The positive (first) part of *Kripke’s Law*: If *x* is identical with *y*, *x* is necessarily identical with *y*.

³⁰ Note that not only Cartesian unionists, *qua dualists*, but also *materialists* are intended by Philosophus to find nothing objectionable in the three propositions the argument is based on, and quite a few of them, I expect, would take the argument to establish the following proposition: “If my body does not now exist, nor any replacement for it, then [with conditional necessity] I do not now exist” – which is just what *materialists* (including Philosophus) want, but *dualists*, of course, don’t want.

³¹ Perhaps Descartes – who in fact did not believe that, in the last resort, *he himself* (this simple “I”, not *the human being Descartes* as normally understood) is a union of *mens* and *corpus* – did indeed believe (in effect) that “my *mens*” (or “*mens mea*”) is a rigid designator. But, as Philo-

may well be the case that it isn't), then concluding "I am necessarily not my *mens*" from "In the past, I was not my *mens*" is like concluding (falsely, of course) "Elisabeth is necessarily not my wife" from "In the past, Elisabeth was not my wife" (or like concluding "I am necessarily not Elisabeth's husband" from "In the past, I was not Elisabeth's husband").³²

Weirdly, Philosophus thinks that Cartesian unionism is not an important position: "As far as I know, no one is a Cartesian unionist, and I don't propose to discuss at length a position no one holds."³³ Quite on the contrary, Cartesian unionism – the view that the human person is a "union or amalgam or whole" of *mens* (or *anima*) and *corpus* – is the most popular dualistic position, and of course, properly speaking, it isn't "Cartesian" at all; rather, it is "Aristotelian," or better still, it is simply *commonsensical*. The (pre-Christian) Roman poet Juvenal already exhorts us (whom he certainly takes to be unions of body and soul): "orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano" (*Satire* 10, line 356). What has varied through the ages is the relative importance *unionists* (let's simply call them this way, omitting the misleading modifier "Cartesian") have accorded to the *body* in the mind-body union they believe in. Nowadays, the importance of the body for unionists is again at least as high as it was in Juvenal's time (whereas in the Christian Middle Ages it was very low).

Any unionist would be well advised to reply to Philosophus's above attempt to *absurdify* his or her position as follows: "In addition to my finding Philosophus's argument logically problematic, Proposition 2 is, in fact, not endorsed by me. I never am, nor ever can be, numerically identical to my *mens*, although, at times, I may very well coincide with my *mens*,³⁴ namely, if I should ever exist – I am inclined to think it possible – without my body, or any replacement for it, existing."

sophus intends the designation "Cartesian unionists," Cartesian unionists certainly need not be committed to all of Descartes's views in order to be "Cartesian unionists."

³² Neither "my wife" nor "Elisabeth's husband" are rigid designators across times and possible worlds. Obviously, both singular terms are *non-rigid*, both across times and possible worlds (in contrast to "I," as used by me or Philosophus, and "Elisabeth," as used by Philosophus or me).

³³ Van Inwagen (2007), p. 206; italics in the original.

³⁴ Remember Tibbles and Tib? Tib is (by definition) Tibbles without its tail. Tibbles and Tib are never ever numerically identical to each other, although at times (Tibbles having lost its tail) they *coincide*.

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