Epistemology of Metaphysics:
An Introduction

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1. Some Words on the Epistemology of Metaphysics

The widespread development of metaphysical debates in the last decades of analytic philosophy has been accompanied by deep-seated doubts about the very viability and ambitions of metaphysics. For instance, Hirsch's quantifier variance has brought back into the spotlight the Carnap/Quine dichotomy on the status of ontology and metaphysics—indeed many share the suspicion that many issues of metaphysics do not have the theoretical significance they are thought to have, and rather display the superficiality and arbitrariness of questions like "does a fist come into being when I close my fingers?". Therefore, "easy ontologies" now abound (Thomasson 2015).

Alternatively, Ladyman *et al.* (2007) have famously launched an assault against "scholastic metaphysics", too detached from any actual scientific research to be relevant, which is to be substituted by a "naturalized metaphysics"—although Paul (2012) has argued that metaphysics is not so distinct in methodology from science.

Metaphysics is seen as contiguous with science, either because it shares some methods and tools with science or because it aims to unify the sciences, as some proponents of naturalized metaphysics argue. This proximity might imply that metaphysical theories inherit some epistemic status from scientific theories. Since science undeniably provides knowledge, it's plausible to argue that metaphysics does too. Moreover, if the justification for scientific knowledge is empirical, then metaphysical knowledge could be empirically justified as well. However, it's not entirely clear whether the justification of scientific knowledge is purely empirical; nor is it clear whether using scientific methods in metaphysics necessarily means its knowledge is empirically justified. For example, mathematics is considered a part of science, but its justification is arguably not empirical. This raises the question: does metaphysics provide truths in the way physics does, or as mathematics does? Are metaphysical truths known a posteriori (based on experience and ob-

servation) or a priori (based on reasoning without recourse to experience and observation)? Merely recognizing a sort of proximity of metaphysics to science does not seem sufficient to resolve this issue.

Friends of metaphysics may find some of these doubts perplexing. At the end of the day, some claims of "traditional" metaphysics appear, on the face of it, as perfectly clear statements concerning an outside reality and its many features (e.g. modal realism, mereological nihilism). Methodological doubts, at this stage, may take the form of an epistemological question: how exactly, are we supposed to know whether these statements are true?

More generally, how is the investigation of this outside reality meant to proceed? Ultimately, discussing the epistemology of metaphysics is an effort in understanding the very nature of metaphysics as a discipline, its subject matter and the resources required to investigate it.

This is an old question, of course; built as a sort of generalization from Benacerraf's Dilemma in the philosophy of mathematics, Peacocke (1999: 1) proposes the so-called "Integration Challenge" viz. "the task of reconciling a plausible account of what is involved in the truth of statements of a given kind with a credible account of how we can know those statements". In many cases, this amounts to a reconciliatory challenge between a certain metaphysics, perhaps accompanied by its own ontology, and the correspondent epistemology. On the one hand, the Integration Challenge appears more pertinent to the more "robust" conceptions of metaphysics; that said, it is far from obvious that "easy" conceptions of metaphysics do not have their own epistemological and methodological hurdles to solve; usually, "easy" conceptions of ontology and/or metaphysics require the existence of certain privileged epistemological paths as opposed to others, which may be source of further discussions.

Yet, despite Peacocke's insistence, the level of sophistication and development in the epistemology of metaphysics is not even remotely comparable to those of metaphysics *tout court*, nor to those of the epistemological debates in general. Only very rarely the epistemology of metaphysics has been recognized and pursued as a field of inquiry in and of itself: the recent surge of interest in the epistemology of modality is an exception to the rule; this is no surprise, given the special status that metaphysical necessities have in metaphysics. However, given the far-reaching and multi-faceted nature of contemporary analytic metaphysics, we expect the epistemology of metaphysics proper to vastly outstrip modal epistemology.

In this special issue we want to *bring the epistemology of metaphysics to the forefront*. The objective of developing the epistemology of metaphysics is of paramount importance: for without a properly developed epistemology, one might think that the prospects for a fully mature analytic metaphysics would not be complete.

2. The Papers

In this special issue we have collected ten papers that, from different angles, all are engaged with the different aspects, challenges and features of the epistemology of metaphysics.

These ten papers could be organised in two groups. Five of them (Bryant, Snellman, Strollo, Tahko, Wirling) tackle general epistemological/methodological questions on the status of metaphysical inquiry. The other five (Cortesi,

Dohrn, Lee, Schoonen, Sgaravatti) all are all engaged with epistemological questions related to specific metaphysical debates, in particular modal metaphysics and grounding.

In "Naturalized Metaphysics without Scientific Realism" Amanda Bryant aims to show that the project of naturalizing metaphysics does not require realist assumptions and that the project of naturalizing metaphysics can come apart from the assumption of realism; in particular she explores how the naturalist program can cohere with even a strong form of scientific antirealism.

In "Between Science and Logic: Securing the legitimacy of Analytic Metaphysics", Andrea Strollo defends the view that analytic metaphysics (or at least a significant portion of it) has the same kind of legitimacy that naturalized metaphysics has. The legitimacy of analytic metaphysics is secure by its methodological and thematic continuity with logic. A nice effect of this view, according to Strollo, is that the rivalry between naturalized metaphysics *vs* analytic metaphysics should be reconceived as a distinction between two different disciplines: philosophy of science and philosophy of logic.

In "Metaphysics as a Science: A Sketch of an Overview", Lauri Snellman sketches a pragmatist methodology for metaphysics. In his view, metaphysical inquiry should be usefully conceived as the result of the interaction of a bottom-up methodology, whose main aim is the description of language-games of some metaphysical relevant words ("there is", "all", "none") with a top-down methodology whose main aim is that of developing conceptual schemes for use as starting-points for scientific research.

In "Laws of Metaphysics for Essentialists", Tuomas Tahko first argues in favour of the view that metaphysical inquiry plays a genuine explanatory role by means of laws of metaphysics. Such laws should be understood, for Tahko, as counterfactual-supporting general principles that are responsible for the explanatory force of non-causal, metaphysical explanations. Second, he argues for a unification of metaphysical and scientific explanation by means of the notion of general essence.

In "Understanding with Epistemic Possibilities: The Epistemic Aim and Value of Metaphysics", Ylwa Wirling proposes a radical reconceptualization of the epistemic aims of metaphysics. According to Wirling, we should conceive metaphysical inquiry in a way that makes compatible the claims that at least some instances of metaphysical inquiry are assessed positively and that metaphysical inquiry is intrinsically plagued by systematic and persistent disagreement between researchers. The solution she proposes is based on the specification of a non-factive notion of understanding, placing the value of metaphysical inquiry mainly in its epistemic role.

In "The Thesis of Experiential Revelation in The Philosophy of Mind: A Guide for The Perplexed", Fabio Cortesi defends the view that awareness of our own phenomenal mental states constitutes a peculiar kind of knowledge and that we have good reason to think that this knowledge be essence-revealing. Cortesi then evaluates the consequences of this view for a materialist framework about phenomenal consciousness and about reality in general.

In "The Feasibility Approach to Imagination as a Guide to Metaphysical Modality", Daniel Dohrn presents a novel approach to modal imagination as a means of knowing metaphysical possibilities. The starting point is the "natural

inclination" to use imagination in simulating solutions to everyday feasibility issues. According to Dohrn, there is a continuity between this natural use of imagination and the use of imagination in tackling philosophical possibility issues.

In "The Pragmatics of Metaphysical Explanation: An Epistemology of Grounding", James Lee aims to show that realist analytic metaphysicians, in particular those engaged in the grounding debate, need not fear epistemic explanations or explanatory practices in general. Lee's approach in developing his epistemology of metaphysical explanation is based on the use of so-called *contrast classes* in order to confer justification for beliefs about metaphysical relations such as grounding.

In "What Everett Couldn't Know", Tom Schoonen criticizes the epistemic side of so-called quantum modal realism (defended by Wilson 2020), according to which modal metaphysical space could be described in terms of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. Schoonen's point is that, from an epistemic point of view, such a view is in a worse condition than Lewis's modal realism. While quantum modal realists have surely the advantage of being able to subsume the epistemology of modality under the general epistemology of science, they would not be able, according to Schoonen, of explaining the ordinary way in which modal knowledge is obtained, given that such ordinary modal knowledge cannot rely on the findings of experimental and theoretical physics.

In "Essence and Knowledge", Daniele Sgaravatti defends a hybrid modal-epistemic account of essence according to which an essence is a set of cognitively significant properties with a certain modal profile. Such an epistemic element in the notion of essence is what best explains the various epistemic roles such a notion is designed to play.

There are many paths that the epistemology of metaphysics might take. Some have already been partially explored, while many others still await adequate development. We hope to that this SI will contribute to the progress of some of them.

References

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