

How it All Hangs Together

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Amie L. Thomasson

The essays in this volume cover the gamut of my work, from its beginnings in work on fiction, through work on the ontology of art and artifacts, social ontology, and work on ordinary objects generally, through more recent work on metametaphysics, modality, and conceptual engineering. On the surface, these themes might seem to have little in common. In this essay, however, I aim to make clear how they have been interconnected, and form parts of a vision of, and for, metaphysics.

I will not here try to reconstruct the reasons in favor of the theses I have argued for--I will have to be content, in each case, to let the books and articles make the case. Instead, here I aim only to make clear how these ideas and topics fit together, in a line of development that led me to successively step back from one set of questions to another, and then another, in an aim to see and develop a bigger picture.

A great deal of the most respected work in metaphysics from the 1950s until I was in graduate school had focused on understanding the world *as presented by the natural sciences*, especially physics, or (as it is sometimes put these days) to develop a 'fundamental ontology'. One common theme of my work (especially my earlier work) is an interest in and respect for the comparatively neglected task of philosophizing about the everyday world--the world of social and cultural objects, works of art and artifacts, social groups, and the like--and the ordinary language we use in everyday living. And so this side of my work can be seen as carrying out some of the task of philosophy as Sellars characterized it, as asking how "things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term" (1963, 1). Here, however, I aim to address not how *things* hang together, but rather how the different parts of my work hang together.

Aiming to understand the everyday world we live in--what Husserl called the 'life-world'-was, however, a task that faced barriers when I came onto the scene. For when I first came into metaphysics in the mid-1990's, metaphysics was dominated by earnest debates about whether mereological sums, properties, people, possible worlds, numbers, works of art, and tables (really) exist. And the artifacts, social and cultural entities, that I was particularly interested in were among those objects most regularly denied.

Like many people, I was bemused by these debates, and by their frequently counterintuitive conclusions. How did we come to a situation where these debates could seem worthwhile? What could possibly be going on here, how could such debates be resolved, and how could they be of value? I began by simply pressing back against eliminativist arguments of various sorts, arguing that *of course* there are tables, paintings, and even fictional characters--given the ordinary sense of these words, and the obvious empirical facts. My philosophical journey has been largely a matter of stepping backwards from first-order ontological concerns (with fiction, works of art, artifacts, and social objects), to try to trace back where things went wrong, what underlying presuppositions had led people astray, and how we could replace them.

Those presuppositions, at the most basic level, lay in views about what philosophy could do, and how we could do it.

Gilbert Ryle wrote, in his intellectual autobiography, "We philosophers [coming of age in the 1930s] were in for a near-lifetime of enquiry into our own title to be enquirers" (1970, 10).

By the time my generation came of age, this self-doubt had been replaced by a smug assumption by metaphysicians that *of course* they could be inquirers, in roughly the same sense as natural scientists (and, as was often said, doing work 'of a piece' with the natural sciences)--answering questions about what exists, and what the natures of various things are, where the results might ('like those fundamental physics') overturn all sorts of common sense views. That presupposition--part of what we might call a 'scientistic' view of metaphysics--I came to see as underlying a huge range of mistakes and missteps and leading into a morass of problems and pseudo-problems. The difficulty isn't just that these debates seem irrelevant to the ways we live, or that they often lead to counter-commonsensical conclusions. It is also that they end up being epistemologically mysterious, with a proliferation of competing views and no clear view of what could resolve the debates, or how we could ever 'know' which is correct. Moreover, while this approach presents metaphysics *on the model* of the natural sciences, it does so in a way that leaves it in an apparent *rivalry with science* that it seems bound to lose, as it lacks the empirical grounding of the sciences.¹ A large part of my work has involved an attempt to trace back this scientistic presupposition, to see where it has come from and to argue that it was a wrong turn in the history of philosophy. And so I have become a critic of much recent work in metaphysics.

But I am more constructive than critical by nature, and my broader goal has been to develop an alternative view of the work of philosophy, and in particular, metaphysics. On this alternative view, I would not say that asking about our title to be 'enquirers' is quite the right expression; certainly not if we think of all inquiry on the model of the natural sciences.² Instead, I would put my guiding question a little more broadly, as asking: What sort of worthwhile work can we do in philosophy, and how can we do it in a way that is clear, epistemologically transparent and relevant to human life?

1. Fiction

But let me start at the beginning, to better show how I became concerned with these questions, and came to formulate answers to them. In my dissertation, which I eventually turned into my first book, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (1999), I developed a theory of fictional characters: what they are, how they depend on such things as the creative acts of authors and on copies of texts and capacities of readers, and why we should say there *are* fictional characters.

As I was working on this project in the 1990's, interest in fiction among analytic philosophers had arisen largely due to concerns in philosophy of language. (Did fictional names refer? If not, how could statements that include such names be meaningful and true?). Two types of reply dominated the landscape then: One was to say that such names *never* refer, and to try to find ways of accounting for the apparent truth of claims like 'Sherlock Holmes is a detective' by

¹ For, as metaphysicians in standard ontological debates insist, there is nothing empirically at stake between, say, those who accept and those who eliminate ordinary objects. You can't say to an eliminativist about tables "I refute you thus" by hitting them with a table.

² Of course, Ryle himself would always vigorously distinguish what he took to be *philosophical* work from the *empirical* work characteristic of the natural sciences--and so would also firmly reject scientistic conceptions of metaphysics, while attempting to articulate an alternative view of what philosophy can do.

paraphrasing the relevant statements (as Russell and Ryle did), or treating them as in the context of a game of pretense (an idea Kendall Walton had developed in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990)). The other prominent response was to say that such names *always* refer--to timeless, changeless nonexistent or abstract objects. This approach was developed first by Alexius Meinong (1904/1960) and later given more explicit formal development in two different ways, by Terence Parsons (1980) and Edward Zalta (1983).

Influenced by my own earlier study of literature (alongside philosophy) in undergraduate days, I aimed to develop an understanding of fictional characters that better reflects our ordinary ways of thinking and talking about fictional characters, and discussing them in literary history and criticism. In developing this view, I was inspired by the work of the phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, a Polish student of Husserl's, whose work applied the phenomenological approach to ontology to study works of literature (in *The Literary Work of Art* (1931/1973)), and to works of art of other kinds, including works of architecture, music, and pictures (in *The Ontology of the Work of Art* (1962/1989)).

The thought was roughly this: *of course* there are fictional characters, and there are true and false things we can say about them when we write literary history and criticism.³ But they aren't timeless, changeless, Platonistic abstract objects or nonexistent objects. Instead, they are created by authors in writing works of fiction; they come to be at a particular place in cultural and literary history, and they may change (say, if the text is revised). On this view, fictional characters are contingent, historical, cultural objects--parts of literary and cultural history. In the terminology I introduced there,⁴ they are 'abstract artifacts': *abstract*, in the sense that they do not have a particular spatio-temporal location (you can't find Anna Karenina anywhere); but *artifacts* in the sense that they come to be only given intentional acts of authors, which create new fictional characters in a particular time and context.

One of the central aims in *Fiction and Metaphysics* was to defend the idea that we need such a category as abstract artifacts--a category that, I argued, includes not only fictional characters, but also other abstract social and cultural creations, such as stories, symphonies, mortgages, and laws of state. I saw defending fictional characters and clarifying what it takes for there to be fictional characters as a first step in a broader program--of developing and defending a more fine-grained ontology better able to accommodate such cultural and social phenomena; an ontology that wouldn't be limited to the traditional categories of physical particulars and timeless Platonistic abstracta.

But *Fiction and Metaphysics* wasn't just the first step towards working on an ontology of social and cultural objects; its writing and later defense also brought me into discussions of metaontology. There, for the first time, I began to address questions such as "What role should parsimony play in our decisions about what to say exists?", and "Should we accept Quine's mantra: 'no entity without identity?'" and most broadly, "How should we go about addressing existence questions?"

The methodology I presupposed in *Fiction and Metaphysics* was roughly a phenomenological approach to ontology—an approach that begins by asking what's involved in the very idea of a fictional character, according to the ways we think and speak about them: What would it take for there to be fictional characters, and what would they be if there were such

³ The idea that there are true and false things we can say about fictional characters in literary criticism had also recently been advanced by Peter van Inwagen (1983).

⁴ I have recently learned that Traugott Schiebe uses the term 'abstract artifact' in a similar way, introducing it independently in his (2021).

things? As challenges to my conclusions and methodology arose, I began to back up to try to articulate and justify more explicitly the metaontological approach I used in defending my claims about fiction. In a follow-up paper ("Fictional Characters and Literary Practices" (2003b)), I argued explicitly that the *natures* of fictional characters are determined by our literary beliefs and practices (this is a first anticipation of the deflationary view of modality I develop much later in *Norms and Necessity* (2020a)). In that (2003b) paper, I go on to argue that since the nature of what fictional characters *would be* is determined by literary practices, once we see what it takes (according to such practices) for there to be fictional characters, it becomes evident that it makes little sense to deny them. For on that conception, all it takes for an author to create a fictional character is that she write a work of fiction involving names *not* referring back to extant people or characters of other stories, and apparently describing (or pretending to describe) what these individuals are like or what they do. Barring global skepticism or massive conspiracy theories, these conditions are frequently met--so we have every reason to accept that there *are* fictional characters. This is a first anticipation of the 'easy' approach to ontology that I develop and defend more explicitly later, in *Ontology Made Easy* (2015).⁵

2. Phenomenological Roots

My training in graduate school included studying the phenomenological tradition, under the always kind and insightful guidance of my dissertation director David Woodruff Smith, who not only shared his extensive knowledge of Husserl, but also ways of relating it to work in the history of analytic philosophy and contemporary philosophy of mind. As mentioned above, the phenomenological tradition influenced my approach to ontology in general, and Ingarden's work on literature and other forms of art centrally influenced my work on fiction and the ontology of art.

After graduate school I also worked directly on the phenomenological tradition, its influence on the history of analytic philosophy, and its bearing on contemporary issues in philosophy of mind. This historical background has influenced my outlook, methodology, and the tools I have to work with in lasting ways.⁶ On the historical end, I became interested in the influence of phenomenology on the development of ordinary language philosophy, tracing that lineage (in my 2002 paper "Phenomenology and the Development of Analytic Philosophy") particularly through the work of Gilbert Ryle. Ryle's careful study of Brentano, Husserl, Ingarden, and Heidegger crucially influenced his own approach to addressing the problem he reports as having preoccupied him throughout the 1920s and 1930s: "What constitutes a philosophical problem; and what is the way to solve it?" (Ryle 1970, 12). And the answer he gives, which is that philosophy is concerned with *conceptual*, not *empirical*, questions, he draws directly from an approving interpretation of Brentano and Husserl (Ryle 1971; cf. my 2002, section 2).

Studying Ryle's work led me to see the long-term influence of phenomenology on ordinary language philosophy, and to identify the commonalities between work in that tradition

⁵ It also reflects the influence of Stephen Schiffer's (1996) 'pleonastic' approach to fictional characters, propositions, properties, etc., which I came to know between the time *Fiction and Metaphysics* came out and the time "Fictional Characters and Literary Practices" was written. I found that Schiffer's work gave a clear and apt way of expressing the approach I had been inclined to, and this was a key influence on my *Ontology Made Easy* (for more on the commonalities and differences between my approach and Schiffer's, see Chapter 3 of *Ontology Made Easy*).

⁶ For more explicit discussion of what phenomenology can bring to ontological methods, and a contrast between this approach and the dominant current analytic approach, see my "What can phenomenology bring to ontology?" (2019).

and the view of philosophy I favored. I began to see myself as in part working to revive the understanding of the proper roles of philosophy and of its methods (and its relation to the natural sciences) that was shared by work in the phenomenological and ordinary language traditions. That is, most broadly speaking, that philosophy is concerned with *linguistic and/or conceptual* work. Of course, in the contemporary historical context, this view required re-thinking, re-formulating and defending against the objections and developments that had led it to fall from favor. So I also set out to better understand the recent history, and respond to, reasons that were given for abandoning that tradition--particularly in the influential work of Quine and Kripke.⁷ I also aimed to *broaden* the earlier view, seeing the work of philosophy as including not only *descriptive* conceptual work, but also *normative* conceptual work--work in conceptual engineering (more on this below). But both Ryle's question, and his orientation in giving an answer, would stick with me.

Second, Ryle's work (especially his 1949) led me to appreciate the idea that different parts of language may serve different *functional roles*, and that failing to notice this may be the underlying source of many philosophical mistakes.⁸ This idea plays a crucial role in *Norms and Necessity* (2020a) and in my ongoing work on linguistic function and the idea of functional pluralism (more on this below).

In my work on phenomenology and philosophy of mind I also came to engage with the work of Wilfrid Sellars. The problem I was working on (in "First-Person Knowledge in Phenomenology" (2005a)) was how we can have first-person knowledge of the contents of our own mental states; and more generally, knowledge of the sort required to do phenomenology. I had long been suspicious of 'higher order perception' views that take this knowledge to involve something like introspection, considered as 'observation' of one's own mental states,⁹ and had long seen an alternative to this in Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction. In that paper I developed what I called a 'cognitive transformation' approach to self-knowledge, based on an interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological reduction. The idea is roughly that knowledge of the contents of one's own mental states arises not from a second act of observing the first, but rather from a kind of 'bracketing': a way of *withholding commitment* about the real existence and nature of a world apparently 'represented' in our mental states, to enable us to 'quote' and study our mental states as *phenomena* rather than *using them* in navigating our way around the world. This Husserlian approach influenced Sellars' view¹⁰ that *looks* talk does not aim to track and describe special things called 'appearances', but rather arises from *is* talk, serving the function of withholding commitment about how the world *really* is.

In my way of reconstructing a form of Husserlian phenomenological reduction, we come to know how things appear to us through two sorts of cognitive transformations out of an original world-oriented experience. Suppose we begin by seeing a bear in the woods (an experience we would, in the natural attitude, *use* in proceeding to run away, take a picture, or...). From there, we can first engage in a reductive transformation, withholding commitment to how the world really is, by introducing 'appears' talk, saying instead merely "there *appears to be* a bear in the woods". From there, we can (given standardly permitted grammatical transformations) go on to

⁷ For those historical analyses and responses, see my *Ordinary Objects* (2007a), Chapter 2; *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), Introduction and Chapter 1, and *Norms and Necessity* (2020a), Chapter 1.

⁸ For an interpretation of Ryle's category differences as based on functional differences, see Price (2009).

⁹ See, e.g., my "After Brentano: A one-level theory of consciousness" (2000) and "Self-Awareness and Self-Knowledge" (2006).

¹⁰ For Sellars' references to the influence of Husserl, see discussion in my (2005a).

nominalize, and to introduce a new noun term for 'an appearance (as-) of a bear in the woods'--enabling us to speak of, and acquire knowledge about, *appearances* (see my 2005a, 129-131).

For me, this work was a first step in developing the ideas I would develop much more thoroughly later (2020a and 2022a): that parts of language (especially: many of those long presenting 'philosophical problems') can be seen as playing many functional roles other than tracking worldly observed features; and that rules governing their introduction may license us to make grammatical transformations to introduce reference to new kinds of 'things', and acquire knowledge about them (an idea I would later generalize in *Ontology Made Easy*).¹¹ This would again pave the way for the neo-pragmatist approach I eventually develop for modality and other philosophical problems (2020a and 2022b).¹²

3. Social and Cultural Objects

The work I did on fictional characters I had always seen as a particular case study, working towards a broader view of how we could understand social and cultural objects more generally--and this took me into a series of papers on the ontology of art and artifacts, and on social ontology, developed around the same time as my work on phenomenology and philosophy of mind.¹³ Some ideas from that phase that have stuck with me and influenced my later work include noting the wide variety of different ways in which different social and cultural objects may depend on both physical objects and human intentions, beliefs, or practices; and arguing (against various objections) that there are no good reasons to deny the existence of social and cultural objects, or to deny that they are 'real'.¹⁴ My prior work on fictional discourse helpfully informed the latter project by making it obvious to me why fictionalist views of talk about social or other ordinary objects (or even about mathematical objects) are mistaken—for these forms of discourse are not analogous to the fictionalizing discourse of novels (see my 2003c and 2013).

Perhaps more important still was noting that social and cultural objects may come into existence in many different ways, via different sorts of rules--not all of which involve simply imposing new social features on extant objects. For some generative rules may enable us to create new abstract social entities (abstract artifacts) such as constitutions and mortgages; and rules of use for other terms may ensure that unknown and unintended byproducts, such as recessions, may also be generated.¹⁵ This brought me to appreciate the huge range of different existence conditions that may be laid out for things of various kinds¹⁶ and the ways diverse entry rules for new noun terms may *entail* the existence of new kinds of things (including abstract artifacts). (Preserving this insight is part of the impetus for the deflationary approach to existence questions I would develop later in *Ontology Made Easy* (2015)).

¹¹ This generalized approach to understanding talk, say, about properties and essences I also trace back to work of Husserl's in my (2017a). I draw out the general connections between a phenomenological approach to ontology and 'easy ontology' in my (2019).

¹² Taking a functional analysis of language also enables me to diagnose where Theodore Sider's (2011) attempt to counter forms of metaontological deflationism by introducing a 'joint-carving quantifier' goes wrong (see *Ontology Made Easy*, Chapter 10).

¹³ See, for example, my (2003a), (2003c), (2004), (2007b), and (2010).

¹⁴ See, e.g., my (2003a). I was also pleased to discover, around this period, Lynne Rudder Baker's (2007) realist ontology of the ordinary world. While our metametaphysical commitments diverged, she was an inspiration and an important ally for me in taking the world of everyday experience seriously, and aiming to make philosophical sense of it.

¹⁵ See especially my (2003c).

¹⁶ This diversity also lies behind my resistance to embracing any 'layered' pictures of reality, as unable to accommodate the huge variety of different rules of use for different sorts of terms. (See my (2014a)).

Another idea from this phase of my work (and from many years of teaching Heidegger's *Being and Time*) that has stuck with me is that part of *what it is* to be an object of certain kinds may involve both *functional* and *normative* features. Work on the functions of artifacts of various kinds has informed my recent work on the functions of language (which can itself be considered an abstract artifact, as I discuss below). And work on the normative features of different kinds of things influenced my work on the ontology of art and social groups. For example, part of what it is to be a work of art may include (as Jerrold Levinson (1979) argued) that the object is *to be regarded or treated* in certain ways; and part of what it is to be a member of a certain social group (say, professors, police officers, or members of certain races or genders) may involve certain *norms* about how one is to *act* and to *be treated by* or *responded to* by others.¹⁷ This would contribute to my later emphasis of the idea¹⁸ that many of our terms do not (or not merely) *describe*, but (also) *impose norms*.

Defending my first-order work on the ontology of art also led me back into questions about how we can answer questions in the ontology of art, and how we can adjudicate debates among competing views. I first began to develop and try out my deflationary metametaphysical views in this context¹⁹--an approach that I would go on to refine and defend at far greater length in my "Answerable and Unanswerable Questions" (2009), *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), and *Norms and Necessity* (2020a).

I had intended the work on social and cultural objects to coalesce into a book. But as I was working on this, I became aware of the increasing number and popularity of arguments among metaphysicians (especially those influenced by Peter van Inwagen's *Material Beings* (1990)) that there *are no* tables, chairs, or other composite material objects. Well, I thought, before defending views about what these things *are*, I had better back up, and write a chapter to address the arguments that there are no such things. And I set out to compile and reflect on the range of such arguments.

The more I looked at them, the more I came to suspect that something had gone wrong somewhere in these seemingly endlessly proliferating debates about 'what exists', with some denying the existence of abstract entities, others denying the existence of composite material objects such as tables, chairs, and mountains (but allowing organisms); others denying organisms but accepting persons, etc. Not only was there a constantly expanding proliferation of such 'ontologies' (with more and more counter-intuitive views being more and more proudly promulgated), there seemed to be no clarity about what it would even take to resolve these debates. Various 'theoretic virtues' were sometimes appealed to, but these seemed to just be traded off in different 'theories' (see Bennett (2009) and Kriegel (2013)). Various paradoxes and puzzles were said to arise from accepting ordinary objects--but often with little attention to ways one could unravel them. A great deal of my later work has been directed to trying to articulate what precisely has gone wrong, how we can do better, and what role remains for metaphysics--even if we leave these debates behind.

The chapter I had originally planned to write, addressing the variety of arguments against the existence of ordinary objects, turned into a book of its own: *Ordinary Objects* (2007a). In it I addressed a range of arguments against the existence of ordinary objects, including arguments that are based on demands for parsimony, or for a non-arbitrary principle saying when a 'new'

¹⁷ On these points, see especially my (2014b), and (2016a). For an allied (but not identical) view of social statuses as behavioral constraints and enablements conferred on individuals, see Ásta's (2018).

¹⁸ Developed at greatest length in *Norms and Necessity* (2020).

¹⁹ For example, in my (2005b).

object is 'composed' out of simpler objects, or based on prohibitions against causal redundancy, ontological vagueness, or co-location, or worries about a rivalry between a scientific and common sense ontology. As I considered the details of these arguments, I found that it was useful to take a step back and examine what these superficially diverse arguments had in common. Several, I found, relied on accepting what were billed as 'completely general metaphysical principles' (whether about the importance of parsimony, the impossibility of co-location, etc.)—which are highly dubious in cases where there are analytic entailments across the principles considered. Others relied on a heavyweight realist view of modality, treating claims about conditions of existence, identity, and persistence as subject to a form of worldly discovery, which could potentially overturn all of our ordinary beliefs built into our ways of thinking and talking. Still other arguments relied on 'generic' existence or counting claims—that is, claims about whether there is some 'thing' (composed in a situation, over and above the parts, etc.) or about how many 'objects' or 'things' there are, where the terms 'object' and 'thing' are supposed to be used in a completely neutral sense, that doesn't involve specifying any sort or sorts of entity at issue.

The key to providing a way around *all* of these diverse arguments, I argued, lay in accepting that our singular and general terms do not refer 'purely causally', but rather possess some sorts of basic conceptual content, especially in the form of what I there called 'frame-level' application and co-application conditions.²⁰ For, given that thesis, we can see that there may be analytic entailments across different sorts of statements—and that some alleged 'metaphysical principles' might not apply across statements with analytic entailments. We can also maintain that these basic (frame-level) application and co-application conditions for our terms fix the most basic modal facts for the entities, if any, they refer to—including their existence and identity conditions (2007a, 189), making metaphysical modal facts knowable in non-mysterious ways.²¹ Finally, we can see why some metaphysical questions (including those formulated using 'generic' appeals to 'objects' and 'things') are ill-formed and unanswerable questions; and why others (say, demanding precise identity conditions) do not have answers awaiting discovery—the best we can do is to propose decisions (2007a, 192).²²

Thus, the point of *Ordinary Objects* ended up being not just to defend the existence of ordinary objects. Instead, the most important (and controversial) conclusions I defended there were metametaphysical conclusions about the nature and limits of metaphysics (2007a, 188)—conclusions I have been refining, justifying, and defending ever since.

4. Metametaphysics

Stepping back from my first-order work in the ontology of fiction and the ontology of artifacts, works of art, and other social and cultural objects thus led me into work on metametaphysics. And defending the metametaphysical views I had begun to sketch in *Ordinary Objects* led me to step back still further. In the metametaphysical work that follows, I have

²⁰ I would now retain the idea that some conceptual content (in the form of rules of use) is required, but would not say that all general nouns, for example, must have application conditions. Some, such as those for numbers, may have entry rules that entitle us to speak of there being a number (say, a prime number between one and five), but do not have application conditions that impose certain requirements on the world in order for there to be numbers.

²¹ This was the initial idea that (through various refinements) grew into the 'modal normativist' view I later articulate more thoroughly and defend at much greater length (2020).

²² This was the beginning of recognizing the idea that one thing that may remain to be done in metaphysics is *conceptual engineering*, an idea I have been developing and defending at greater length in a series of papers (2017b, 2021a).

addressed questions about what we can come to know in metaphysics and how we can claim to know it; how we can adjudicate debates about what exists, or what the natures of things of various kinds are; and more broadly: about what contribution work in metaphysics can make to human life, and how it can avoid being a second-rate rival to the empirical sciences.

As I saw it, debates in metaphysics regularly center on two kinds of question: questions about what exists (these had come to prominence in the post-Quinean game of defending competing 'ontological' views about whether numbers, properties, fictional characters, social objects, events, mental states, etc. 'really' exist), and modal questions about the 'natures' of things of various sorts (addressing questions such as: What are the identity conditions for persons? What are the persistence conditions for artifacts? Does the 'real' world depend on minds or language? Do minds depend on bodies?....).²³ So I set out to write a book (then tentatively entitled '*Deflating Metaphysics*') divided into two parts, addressing both kinds of question and defending a deflationary approach to each.

That planned book became too long for a single volume, so I ended up splitting it in two: One on existence questions (that became *Ontology Made Easy* (2015)); the other on metaphysical modal questions (that became *Norms and Necessity* (2020a)).

I had come to see, through my first-order work on the ontology of fiction, social and cultural, and other ordinary objects, that the variety of arguments I found suspicious and problematic--wildly revisionary views about what things of various sorts 'are' (e.g. that works of art are action-types) or about what exists (e.g. that there are no tables and chairs, that there are only simples, or one great blobject, or...)--all relied on what was presented as a neo-Quinean²⁴ approach to ontology. By the time I was writing, the so-called 'neo-Quinean' approach had become so dominant and ubiquitous that it was largely invisible as a set of methodological presuppositions.²⁵

In *Ontology Made Easy*, I set out to unearth and examine those presuppositions, and develop and defend a forgotten alternative way to address questions about what there is. Attempts to 'eliminate' fictional characters, social objects, artifacts, numbers, properties, and other sorts of thing nearly always²⁶ relied on treating questions about what exists as 'deep' ontological questions, to be addressed by considering whether quantifying over such entities would form an essential part of our 'best total theory'--where the best theory in turn was determined in part by its possession of theoretic virtues including ontological parsimony, ideological simplicity, explanatory power, and fruitfulness. This was part and parcel of a view that aimed to treat metaphysics as parallel to or 'of a piece with' the work of the natural sciences.

²³ I did not mean to claim that metaphysics is *exhausted* by such questions (it is too diverse and evolving a set of practices for any such claims to be safe); only that these cover a great many of the questions dealt with by metaphysicians at and before the time of my writing. One area of interest that was developing around the same time was interest in what came to be known as 'grounding' questions, generally thought of as not *merely* modal. Those would have to be addressed separately. (But see Locke (2020) for ways of extending the modal normativist approach to understand and address these questions as well).

²⁴ See, for example, van Inwagen (2009). David Lewis (1986, 4) explicitly and influentially invokes a neo-Quinean approach to ontology in his own defense of possible worlds. In saying this, I do not mean to attribute all of these views to the *historical* Quine, whose pragmatist side was characteristically forgotten in the rush to present him as a savior of ontology (see Price 2009 (326-7)).

²⁵ Though the once impenetrable base of serious metaphysics was already starting to show cracks, largely through Eli Hirsch's (2002a, 2002b) irreverent criticisms of revisionary ontology.

²⁶ Occasionally there were also arguments that accepting the relevant entities (fictional characters, tables...) would lead us into puzzles or paradoxes. I addressed such arguments separately, showing in each case how the puzzles or paradoxes could be disentangled.

But this scientific approach attempted to buy metaphysics the respectability of the sciences at the price of making its epistemology mysterious (for how were we to come to discover these deep 'metaphysical facts' about the essences of things in the world, or whether composite material objects 'really' exist?) and making it appear as a second-rate rival to the natural sciences in claiming to tell us what exists and what the world is like.

Against this, I had long argued that whether entities of a certain kind (say, fictional characters) exist is not a matter for deep ontological argument. Instead, (I had argued) what it takes for there to be a fictional character (or table, or...) is, at the most basic level, established by the rules of use for the relevant terms (or concepts). And often it's just obvious that (barring radical skeptical scenarios) relevant sufficient conditions are fulfilled--in which case, we should conclude that there *are* the relevant entities. This approach was cohesive with the phenomenological approach to ontology that I had learned from Ingarden. But I came to realize that such an approach was articulated in crisp and useful terms by Carnap, in "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", and was also closely related to and cohesive with recent 'neo-Fregean' approaches developed in the philosophy of mathematics by Crispin Wright and Bob Hale (2001) and with the pleonastic approaches to fictional characters, propositions, properties, and much more, developed by Stephen Schiffer (1994, 1996, 2003)²⁷--which insisted that we can introduce reference to new, abstract objects, via trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths. (An idea along these lines was already suggested in Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (see my "Husserl on Essences" (2017a)).

With these shoulders to stand on, I sought in *Ontology Made Easy* to explicitly develop a neo-Carnapian 'easy' approach to existence questions, in a unified way that could address debates about the existence of concrete and abstract entities alike--where we take these as what Carnap would have called 'internal questions', leaving the linguistic framework and its rules intact, and asking the relevant existence questions *using* that framework.²⁸ The work of *Ontology Made Easy* can be seen as a way of developing and defending an approach to existence questions that would provide the backup I had needed for many of the arguments I gave earlier for the existence of fictional characters, artifacts, social objects, and other ordinary objects. It also was a way of tracing out the source of the historical wrong turn, and developing a challenging alternative to the neo-Quinean approach to ontology that had been so dominant throughout my lifetime in philosophy. Such an alternative I saw as desperately needed to bring epistemological clarity to our work on metaphysics--making it clear *how* the relevant existence questions could be answered, and debates adjudicated.

The central point I argued for there (2015) is that existence questions are *easy* to answer. Often, they are answerable by trivial inferences from uncontested truths. More generally, those existence questions that are well-formed and answerable at all (I argued) can be answered with nothing more than empirical inquiry and conceptual analysis (though both of those may, in some cases, be difficult and time-consuming). Existence questions, so understood, are not suitable subjects for 'deep metaphysical' debates (about 'what (really) exists'), and the popular project of 'developing and defending an ontology' is best left behind.

²⁷ Other recent sources of inspiration along these lines included the work of Mark Johnston (1988) and Paul Horwich's deflationary approach to truth (1998, 1999).

²⁸ The idea that such questions can be understood and addressed in the mode of *external* questions (roughly about what language or concepts we should use) is also important to me, and shows up in my work on conceptual engineering (e.g. in my 2016b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b).

So what, if anything, remains for metaphysics to do? As I note in *Ontology Made Easy*, metaphysics has always addressed other sorts of questions than existence questions--in fact, the obsession with existence questions is a relatively recent aberration. Modal questions of course remain: I would come to address those in *Norms and Necessity* (2020a).²⁹ Conceptual work remains to be done as well, including both local and global forms of conceptual analysis--and including addressing *functional* questions about aspects of our language and concepts (doing what Huw Price (2011, 13) had called 'linguistic anthropology') that may shed new light on old metaphysical debates.

As I presented this idea at a talk at a conference in Canberra, Australia, in the early 2000s, I recall Sally Haslanger talking to me afterwards, asking something to the effect of: But don't you think that we can ask questions not just about how our concepts *do* work, but about how they *should* work?³⁰ "Why, of course!", was my reply--and this, together with my background in Carnap, may have been the start of my thinking about the importance of conceptual engineering, and the ways this broadens our view of what metaphysics can do (and sometimes what it has done). In *Ontology Made Easy* (2015) I suggest that conceptual work needn't be just *descriptive* or *analytical* in nature--it can also involve *normative* work on what concepts or language we *should* use and how we should use it: work in conceptual engineering (a topic that was just gaining more widespread recognition and popularity around that time). In later work I have aimed to develop and defend that idea more fully.

The work in *Ontology Made Easy* thus not only aims at a kind of vindication of some of the methods used in my earlier, first-order work on ontology. It also forms the first volume of what is intended as a trilogy, aiming to deflate the old pretensions of metaphysics to 'discover' deep truths about what exists and about the natures of things of various kinds, to reject the 'scientific' view of metaphysics, and to develop a more fruitful and transparent alternative.

Ontology Made Easy addresses existence questions of metaphysics; *Norms and Necessity* addresses the modal questions; and the planned volume *Rethinking Metaphysics* will develop a more positive vision of what metaphysics *can* do (and often has done), in the form of largely linguistic and conceptual work--both of a descriptive and normative sort: work in conceptual engineering.

5. Functional Pluralism

As mentioned above, *Norms and Necessity* was originally conceived as part of a total project of deflating metaphysics--the part to focus on modal questions in metaphysics. What for me is distinctive about that work is the way that the idea of functional pluralism in language came to fruition for me there. As I said earlier, I had been attuned to the possibility of functional pluralism somewhat earlier, through my work on Ryle and on Sellars (as well as through teaching figures such as Wittgenstein, Ayer, and Heidegger), and from my work on the problem of first-person knowledge.³¹ But where I found the functional pluralist idea most insightful and indispensable was in my work on modality.

²⁹ 'Post-modal' questions about grounding remain too--see Locke (2020) for discussion of how the normativist framework may be extended to cover those questions.

³⁰ Her own influential (2000) paper had recently made this point vivid.

³¹ Another early source for me, carried over from my work on fiction, came in work on *fictionalisms* of various kinds. For while I tend to disagree with the ontological conclusions of fictionalists (say, that discourse about numbers, etc. is *merely fictional* or *pretending*--see my 2015, Chapter 5), fictionalists such as Stephen Yablo (see, e.g., his 2005) have often done crucial work in showing what functions *other than* tracking worldly entities forms of discourse, such as mathematical discourse, serve.

In *Ordinary Objects* (Chapter 3) I had laid out what I there called a 'conceptualist' view of modality, according to which the most basic (metaphysical) modal claims are analytic, and had argued that the most basic conditions of existence, identity, and persistence for the objects we refer are thus discoverable by a kind of conceptual analysis, making it clear how we can come to know basic metaphysical modal truths by means of our conceptual competence and reasoning abilities. (And thus also making clear why radically revisionary views about the identity and persistence conditions of things of various sorts were bound to go wrong.) My main goals in that initial foray into the problems of modality were to show how such a view was *different* from the much-maligned modal *conventionalist* view, and to show that it did not lead us to a form of anti-realism or to an ontology of mere 'stuff' rather than individuated *things*. I was already aware then that the key to avoiding the difficulties of past conventionalist views of modality was *not* to treat our modal statements as being *about* or *made true by* our (adopting certain) linguistic conventions. Following Ayer's (1936/1952) wording, in *Ordinary Objects* I expressed it as the view that basic metaphysical modal statements 'illustrate' our linguistic conventions, and argued that since these claims are analytic, they have no need of truthmakers.³²

But in the intervening time, I came to discover neo-pragmatist work by Huw Price (2011), Robert Brandom (1994), Michael Williams (2011), and others (and also went back to study work by Simon Blackburn (1993) in the related expressivist tradition). Price's work especially presented something of a breakthrough for me; and through his work (and that of allies in the neo-pragmatist tradition) I came to a better way of developing and defending an approach to modality along these lines by the time I wrote *Norms and Necessity*,³³ (as well as to a more thorough appreciation of the importance of a functional pluralist approach to language).

In *Norms and Necessity*, I dropped the controversial talk of 'analyticity' (2020a, 46) and came to speak instead in terms of 'semantic rules'. And (inspired by Price's work) I came to see that the best way of diagnosing the problems with many metaphysical treatments of modal discourse, and with problematic forms of conventionalism alike, was in the assumption that all statements serve to describe or track 'features of reality' that serve to make the relevant statements true. Against this, I argued, modal discourse serves fundamentally *normative* functions. In the case of *metaphysical* modal discourse, these functions include enabling us to communicate, enforce, and renegotiate semantic rules in particularly clear and useful ways. Taking a normativist approach to metaphysical modal discourse, I argue in *Norms and Necessity*, enables us to avoid old ontological and epistemological problems of modality, as well as to clarify the methodology of metaphysics.³⁴

³² I dithered a bit on the question of whether and how they could be true--at first entertaining the idea that basic modal statements are in a sense converted commands, and so do not require truthmakers; perhaps even are not apt for truth or falsehood (2007, 69). But to preserve the sense that they can be true, I ultimately argued, we can also see that they are guaranteed true given relations in rules of use (though these aren't *truthmakers*; they just establish the meaning of the claim, in such a way that it always comes out true, regardless of worldly facts) (2007, 70). What I would say now is that modal claims enter language with a regulative function (much as commands do), but may (for good functional reasons) take the grammatical form of declaratives, which can be true or false, can be embedded, reasoned with as declaratives are, etc. (Though I would still say that such modal claims are not aiming to *track* worldly features and do not require appeal to truthmakers to 'explain what makes them true'.)

³³ This discovery was facilitated by discussions with Price during an extended research stay at the University of Sydney in 2007, as well as by attending a series of conferences on neo-pragmatism he organized.

³⁴ The focus on function also, as I argue there (2020, Chapter 3), enables us to avoid the notorious 'embedding' or Frege-Geach problem that plagued earlier 'speech act' analyses of moral, modal, existential and other forms of discourse. For we can distinguish the enduring *functions* of the discourse and the *rules* that enable the relevant forms of language to fulfill those functions, from the fleeting and diverse ways the terms are *used* on particular occasions.

The work of *Norms and Necessity* is a keystone for my overall work, bringing together both older, more recent, and forthcoming projects in ways that show their mutual support. First, it provides at last a fuller support for the methods I used in addressing metaphysical and ontological questions from the very beginning of my work: showing why conceptual analysis is and should be a relevant method for coming to know many metaphysical modal truths. It also makes it clear why, as I had long argued (2003b, 2009), we should expect there to be places of indeterminacy, where there are no precise modal facts to be 'discovered'. For the semantic rules are often open-ended, indeterminate, or renegotiable in the face of changes in the world or our knowledge, and it is a matter for *decision* what we should do with them.

The work of *Norms and Necessity* is also supported by my earlier work on easy ontology. For given the easy ontological method of addressing existence questions, we can accept the normativist view of metaphysical modal statements, and still allow that trivial inferences enable us to refer to modal facts, modal properties, and even possible worlds. As a result, accepting normativism needn't require us to *deny* that there are modal facts and properties (still less, to deny that there are mind-independent ordinary objects that have these modal properties). Easy ontology and modal normativism form a mutually supporting package of deflationary views.

The work of *Norms and Necessity* also brings far closer to completion the overall metametaphysical project (begun for existence questions in *Ontology Made Easy*) of demystifying the methods and epistemology of metaphysics, and bringing us away from the problematic scientific conception, to a more transparent and fruitful conception of metaphysics. For it enables us to develop a clear story of how we can come to know those metaphysical modal facts there are, using nothing more mysterious than conceptual competence, reasoning abilities, and (sometimes) knowledge of empirical facts.

Finally, the work of *Norms and Necessity* helps establish the *need for* and appropriate *methods for* conceptual engineering--a central theme of my recent and current work.³⁵ Seeing claims of metaphysical necessity as object-language reflections of semantic rules, and combining this with the view that our semantic rules are often vague, open-ended, indeterminate, and subject to renegotiation, gives us reason to think that many debates in modal metaphysics are best seen as (implicitly) engaging in metalinguistic negotiation for views about how we *should use* central terms ('person', 'freedom', 'causation'...).³⁶ It also gives reason to think that we might make our work more transparent by engaging in such decision-making more explicitly by undertaking conceptual engineering. In this way, conceptual engineering can give us a way of understanding some of the valuable work that has been done in the history of metaphysics, and of showing what metaphysics legitimately *can* do going forward, without falling into epistemological mysteries or a rivalry with the natural sciences.³⁷

6. Conceptual Engineering

The functional pluralism that lies at the heart of *Norms and Necessity* also plays a central role for me in articulating a fruitful and appropriate methodology for conceptual engineering. I have argued (2020b) that the notion of *linguistic function* should play a crucial role in conceptual

³⁵ See my (2020a), (2021a), (2021b), (2022a).

³⁶ I develop this side of the idea in my (2016b), building on work on metalinguistic negotiation by David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013).

³⁷ I argue for this reconception of metaphysics in my (2017b) and (2021b).

engineering.³⁸ My work here was informed by my earlier work on cultural abstract artifacts. For given that work, it was natural to see languages themselves as cultural abstract artifacts, which come about in particular human circumstances, to serve a range of human needs and purposes, and are subject to change over time.³⁹ It was also natural to think that parts and aspects of language could (like other cultural artifacts) be given a *functional* analysis.

The notion of linguistic function plays a central role in the project of conceptual engineering, as I see it. It should play a central role first in the reverse engineering phase of understanding how our extant terms and concepts work. For we can often disentangle ourselves from old philosophical puzzles if we begin by properly understanding the functions served by the relevant form of discourse, rather than just assuming that all discourse functions to track 'features of reality' (the work of *Norms and Necessity* on metaphysical modal discourse serves as an example of this point, see also my 2022b). We can also make better decisions about whether to retain, revise, or reject various sorts of terms (for numbers, properties, races, genders, ...) if we begin by understanding what functions they serve--so that we can better assess both how well they serve those functions, and whether they are functions we want to preserve or reject. Finally, understanding linguistic functions, and the rules that enable them to fulfill those functions, can enable us to see why we would have, and want, a language that licenses us to make the trivial inferences that easy ontological arguments rely on--given the useful new functions the introduced terms serve in discourse.⁴⁰ And so, this work on linguistic function also lends further support back to easy ontology, and even to the earlier work on showing how various puzzles that motivate forms of eliminativism can be dissolved.

At the deepest level, appreciating the plurality of linguistic functions also enables us to better diagnose the mistakes behind the scientific model of metaphysics--which relies on treating all discourse, including the moral, modal, or mathematical discourse that has long puzzled metaphysicians--on the model of ordinary empirical talk tracking the perceptible world, or on the model of scientific explanation.⁴¹

For me, the notion of linguistic function also plays a central role in constructive projects in conceptual engineering. For if we begin with a view of the functions (to be) served by our terms, we can assess how well proposed revisions or constructions (will) fulfill those functions, and thus make decisions in conceptual engineering that are not merely arbitrary, but also don't require knowledge of epistemically mysterious 'metaphysical' facts. In this way, a pluralistic view of linguistic functions is essential for developing a good approach to conceptual engineering that can treat it as an alternative to (and not relying on) serious metaphysics (see my 2020b).

But how can we determine what functions diverse parts of our language serve? Just as anthropologists and archeologists aim to determine the functions of ancient concrete artifacts, we can look to empirical work for a useful approach to determining the functions of (parts of) language.⁴² A natural place to begin is with work in empirical linguistics, particularly in systemic functional linguistics (a branch much influenced by, and influential in, anthropology), to answer

³⁸ I am not alone in this: the idea that linguistic function should play a central role in conceptual engineering is also defended by Sally Haslanger, and (in a more restricted form) by Ingo Brigandt (cite).

³⁹ Other views along these lines were developed by Kaplan (1990), and by Irmak (2019). The latter explicitly builds on my work on abstract artifacts.

⁴⁰ See my (2022b).

⁴¹ See my (2022b).

⁴² This echoes Huw Price's call to adopt the perspective of linguistic anthropology (2011, 13).

questions about the functions served by various linguistic forms and enablements.⁴³ My current research (begun in my 2022a) aims to build on that work to answer questions about what the functions of various areas of discourse are, how we can identify them, and how we can use that knowledge to better untangle old philosophical problems and make better decisions in conceptual engineering. In this way, I hope to not only sustain a deflationary metametaphysical approach without epistemological mysteries, and to show how to unravel a range of old philosophical puzzles (including many that have led to eliminativism), but also to show how to develop a clear and compelling re-conception of much of the worthwhile work of metaphysics, and philosophy more broadly, as work in conceptual engineering.

7. Conclusion

Here I have aimed to make it clear how the various parts of my work, from work on fiction and the ontology of art, through social ontology, philosophy of mind, phenomenology, metametaphysics, and conceptual engineering, hang together. I have also tried to show how the sequence of topics reflects a 'stepping back' from one set of problems (first-order metaphysical problems about the existence and natures of fictional characters, works of art, social objects) to examine the deeper presuppositions on which they rely (presuppositions about metametaphysics, methodology, modality, and language).

More importantly, I hope I have made clear the way in which my recent work comes together in an attempt to show where much work in recent metaphysics has gone wrong, and to develop an alternative view of what philosophy can do, and how we can do it, that makes philosophy more epistemologically transparent and more clearly relevant to human life. The deflationary metametaphysical approach I develop aims to demystify metaphysics by reconceiving the central work of metaphysics not as 'discovering' deep facts about what (really) exists or about the 'essences' of things of various kinds, but rather as work in conceptual engineering (both reverse engineering and (re-)constructive engineering). By so doing, we can disentangle many old problems, and blow the cover off some pretensions of metaphysicians to 'discover' deep worldly truths. Instead, we can lay bare the practical nature of our conceptual decisions, where the functions our concepts serve--or those we aim to serve via our interventions--must be made public and open to debate.

I have become known as a critic of metaphysics; and in some ways, of course, my work in this key is reminiscent of other work critical of metaphysics, for example by Wittgenstein and by the logical positivists, for whom 'metaphysics' was largely a term of derision.⁴⁴ But there is also an important difference: I aim not for a slash and burn *rejection* of metaphysics, but rather for a *reconception* of it that can preserve a sense of its potential usefulness and value for human life. I am a critic of much work in *recent* metaphysics. I do think that the scientific conception of metaphysics has led us astray, and that much of the work that has gone on in the post-Quinean revival of metaphysics has been misdirected, especially in ontological debates about what 'really' exists, and many wildly revisionary views about the existence or natures of things of various kinds. One way I have progressed in my work is to move from a vague suspicion of such debates and positions, and thinking that something must have gone wrong somewhere, to being able to

⁴³ For example, questions about what functions are served by a modal system, a mood system, a capacity to make transformations across grammatical categories, etc.

⁴⁴ Though these were allies I came to appreciate later, not the original inspiration for my approach. Writing in a different time and context, their opponents weren't really mine, and a different approach was needed to diagnose the problems with the post-1970 revival of metaphysics, and to more fully develop a viable alternative.

better pinpoint *where* they have gone wrong, historically and argumentatively. I have also been aiming to develop an alternative approach that is cohesive with much past work in philosophy, but avoids the wrong turn, preserves the value of much past work in philosophy.

For despite suspicions about much work in recent metaphysics, I do think that much of value has been done in historical debates, say, about what free will is and whether we have it, what art is, how we should track personal identity, and so on. Many such debates (as I argue in my 2016b) can be seen as implicitly engaging in metalinguistic negotiation--renegotiating what concepts or terms we should use, and how we should use them, and thus implicitly in doing work in conceptual engineering.⁴⁵ Putting work in this key, however, requires us to be transparent about the practical concerns motivating our conceptual choices, and about the fact that we *are* making conceptual choices--not 'discovering' deep facts about reality.

Such work in conceptual engineering is clearly important and has great past and potential impact for human life. For how we use such terms or concepts as 'person', 'cause', 'responsible', 'art', 'woman', 'intelligence', 'nature', 'property', etc. has had and will continue to have enormous importance for our legal and political system, our education system, our scientific investigations, and most basically, for our ways of acting, valuing, and treating each other and ourselves. Reconceiving metaphysics in this way can not only demystify metaphysics and avoid the appearance of a rivalry with science, but can also preserve an important role for metaphysics, reconceived. For conceptual engineering can enable us to not only make sense of, but perhaps even to change, our ways of thinking, theorizing, and living.^{46,47}

⁴⁵ Other debates, too, about what conceptual scheme is needed to be presented with a spatio-temporal world at all, or with a world of agents, persons, causal order, etc., can similarly be seen on this model as interesting work in reverse-engineering our conceptual scheme.

⁴⁶ On this point, see my (2021b).

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Ben Blumson, Åsa Burman, Ron Morales and Mark Moyer, for helpful comments on a prior version of this paper.

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