**What can we do, when we do metaphysics?**

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What are we doing, when we do metaphysics? A tempting answer—popular among contemporary metaphysicians—is to think of metaphysics as engaged in discovering especially deep or fundamental facts about the world. But there are familiar and formidable problems for this ‘heavyweight’ conception of metaphysics. First, it leaves the epistemology of metaphysics unclear: by what methods are we supposed to be able to discover these deep or fundamental features of reality? Second, it leaves metaphysics in danger of falling prey to a rivalry with science—for isn’t it the purview of physics to discover the deep and fundamental facts about reality, and doesn’t it do so better than metaphysics? Third, the radical and persistent disagreements that have characterized metaphysics for millennia lead to skepticism about whether metaphysicians are really succeeding in discovering such facts—which might encourage some to abandon metaphysics altogether.

In the face of these difficulties, deflationary positions about metaphysics have become increasingly prominent. The deflationist is suspicious of the thought that metaphysicians are like scientists in discovering ‘deep facts’ about the world and its nature. The deflationist also takes a more cautious view of the methods available to metaphysics, typically limiting what we can sensibly do in metaphysics to some combination of conceptual and empirical work—with the metaphysician’s share of the work being largely a matter of conceptual analysis. But the idea that the core work of metaphysics is conceptual analysis makes it difficult to account for the felt depth, importance, and world-orientation of debates in metaphysics. Indeed many have thought that this leaves metaphysics nothing of interest to do.

I think this is too hasty, however. Here I aim to sketch a broader conceptualist model, on which metaphysics may undertake not merely descriptive but also normative conceptual work. This broader model, I will argue, enables us to preserve—and in some cases improve on—the advantages of the descriptive conceptualist approach in avoiding epistemic mysteries and rivalry with science. But it also enables us to give a more satisfying view than descriptive conceptual analysis can of what we can do when we do metaphysics: a view that does far better at explaining the radical disagreement that persists in metaphysics, and gives a much more satisfying account of the apparent world-orientation, depth, and potential importance of work in metaphysics. Yet it does so without sacrificing the demystifying advantages of deflationism.

I will begin by reviewing the problems faced by heavyweight conceptions of metaphysics, and the ways in which descriptive conceptual analysis has tried to avoid them. Then I will go on to develop and argue for the view that metaphysics has been, and can legitimately be, engaged in normative as well as descriptive conceptual work. Finally, I will make a pragmatic argument for adopting this broader conceptualist view of what metaphysics does, and what it can do.

**Difficulties for Heavyweight Metaphysics**

Metaphysicians often think of themselves as making discoveries about what really exists, and about the persistence conditions or modal properties of things of various sorts. Those I will call ‘heavyweight metaphysicians’ think of these facts as ‘epistemically metaphysical’ (to use a phrase of Ted Sider’s (2011, 187)), in the sense that they can be answered neither by direct empirical methods nor by conceptual analysis. But, as mentioned above, there are familiar and formidable epistemic problems in figuring out how we *are* supposed to come to know the relevant ontological and modal facts. The methods most often employed in metaphysical debates involve arguing that one’s theory better handles certain thought experiments or imagined cases. Yet if we think of metaphysical facts as deep facts of the world, it is hard to see how we can be justified in using thought experiments to discover them (see Sosa 2008 and Thomasson 2012). Imaginative experiments certainly aren’t thought to play a major role in deciding among scientific theories. If we think of metaphysics as similarly discovering worldly facts, it seems there is just as little reason for thinking imaginative experiments have a legitimate role there. Another prominent method of arguing for a metaphysical position is to argue that it better preserves certain ‘theoretic virtues’ than its rivals. In this regard, metaphysics better parallels the methods of the sciences, where theory choice is guided by appeal to theoretic virtues such as empirical adequacy, explanatory power, or simplicity. However, where metaphysical views (unlike most scientific views) are concerned, rivals ‘theories’ are typically equivalent in empirical adequacy. Moreover, as Karen Bennett (2009) and Uriah Kriegel (2013) have argued, rival metaphysical theories often involve simply trading some of the remaining theoretical virtues off against another. Moreover, as Phillip Bricker has argued (forthcoming), the remaining theoretic virtues (other than empirical adequacy) generally are a matter of the *usefulness* of the relevant theory *for creatures like us*—with our relevant cognitive capacities and limitations. But then it is hard to see how one could take those to be reasons for thinking the relevant theory correctly reports the metaphysical facts, rather than just thinking it is of greater pragmatic value.

Another threat to the heavyweight conception of metaphysics comes from the apparent rivalry with science that arises if we think of metaphysics as aimed at discovering deep facts about what exists and what the world is like. As Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow rather bluntly put the point:

…people have always asked a multitude of questions: How can we understand the world in which we find ourselves? How does the universe behave? What is the nature of reality? Where did all this come from?…. Traditionally these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge. (2012, 5)

A third threat to the heavyweight conception of metaphysics comes from noting the radical and persistent disagreements in metaphysics. For in metaphysics, unlike science, there is nothing like convergence on the truth (or even progress on convergence) to show for our labors. Instead, there seems to be an increasing proliferation of metaphysical theories, with no agreement even on what might resolve the debates among them. This in turn might lead to a skeptical outlook—to denying that we ever could know the truth. Along these lines, Karen Bennett argues that for at least some metaphysical disputes, there is little justification for believing either side—it’s not clear that we can ever find grounds for settling these disputes (2009, 42). Bryan Frances (forthcoming) argues for a form of skepticism based on an analysis of the Philosophical Survey—a poll of over 3000 professional philosophers and graduate students, asking their opinions on 30 core philosophical questions. Based on the diversity of answers given, Frances argues that (assuming we think there are correct answers to these philosophical questions), where definite answers are given, the average philosopher can be thought to get 47%-67% right. Hardly an impressive score! As a result, he argues, we should suspend judgment indefinitely, refraining from believing anything on these issues (forthcoming, 11). This sort of radical disagreement in metaphysics might then lead us to a skeptical torpor—thinking that, undiscoverable as such facts are, we may as well give up trying, and turn our attention elsewhere.

**The Descriptive Conceptual Approach**

Given the difficulties that arise for and from a heavyweight conception of metaphysics, one might turn to a more deflationary conception of what metaphysics does and can do. A time-honored alternative to thinking of metaphysics as engaged in discovering deep ‘epistemically metaphysical’ facts is to think of it instead as involved in conceptual work. Call this approach (broadly construed) the ‘conceptualist’ approach, contrasted with the ‘heavyweight’ approach. A conceptualist approach of various forms was dominant about a hundred years ago in the work of philosophers such as Husserl, Ryle, Wittgenstein and Carnap, and forms of the approach have been defended more recently by Frank Jackson (1998) and myself (2015).

The most common development of a conceptualist approach is to see the (proper) work of metaphysics as engaged in conceptual analysis: determining the contours of our conceptual scheme, the rules that govern our concepts, and/or the relations among our concepts. Details here of course vary among philosophers. As Peter Strawson described it (without endorsing it), a traditional vision takes the task as ‘a kind of intellectual taking to pieces of ideas or concepts; the discovering of what elements a concept or idea is composed and how they are related’ (1992, 2). Strawson himself describes the task as follows: ‘the philosopher labours to produce a systematic account of the general *conceptual structure* of which our daily practice shows us to have a tacit and unconscious mastery’ (1992, 7). Gilbert Ryle spoke of mapping the ‘logical geography’ of our concepts (e.g. of belief, intention, action, mind) (1949, 8). Frank Jackson takes the role of conceptual analysis to be ‘that of addressing the question of what to say about matters described in one set of terms *given* a story about matters in another set of terms’ (1998, 44)—for example, what to say about the world as described in moral terms given a description of the world in physical terms. And he takes the method for this to involve ‘appeal to what seems to us most obvious and central’ about the topic ‘as revealed by our intuitions about possible cases’ (1998, 31). While they may differ in the details, what these approaches have in common is the thought that a primary task of metaphysics—or perhaps even all of philosophy—is what we might call *descriptive* conceptual analysis, aiming to determine the actual rules governing our concepts and/or the relations among them.

A conceptualist approach is attractive for many reasons.[[1]](#footnote-2) First, it has the potential to ease the epistemic problems of heavyweight metaphysics. It enables us to vindicate the use of traditional methods in metaphysics, such as consideration of imagined cases—since these plausibly enable us to determine the rules governing our concepts. More broadly, it enables us to demystify the epistemology of metaphysics. For on this model we can see how knowledge in metaphysics may be acquired by making use of our conceptual competence (often alongside ordinary empirical methods)—not requiring any distinctively metaphysical insights into a realm of covert metaphysical facts. I have argued at length elsewhere (2007b, 2013) that those modal questions of metaphysics that are answerable can be answered via a form of conceptual analysis, in some cases combined with empirical work. For (I have argued) the most basic metaphysical modal claims may be seen as object-language correlates of the constitutive semantic rules governing our terms or concepts, and so as learnable via a form of conceptual analysis. Thus by elucidating the rules governing our actual concept of *person* or *work of art,* we might hope to grasp when an individual would, and would not, count as the same person; what sorts of change a work of art would (and would not) survive, and so on. We can combine this with empirical information to get more detailed modal knowledge—for example, if we can tell (by conceptual analysis) that a painting couldn’t survive the destruction of its canvas, and we acquire the empirical information that a canvas can’t survive temperatures of 500 degrees Fahrenheit, then we can also tell that a painting couldn’t survive such temperatures.[[2]](#footnote-3)

It is perhaps a little harder to see how the existential questions of metaphysics can be answered through a combination of empirical and/or conceptual work. But I have argued at length elsewhere (2015) that they can—at least when such questions are taken in what Carnap would have called the ‘internal’ sense: that is, as questions asked *using* the relevant linguistic framework.[[3]](#footnote-4) Given conceptual competence, many existence questions (Do tables exist?, Do organisms exist?) can be answered by means of simple empirical observation. If you have mastered the concepts and so know what it takes for there to be tables or organisms, go have a look in that restaurant and you’ll have your answer to the question ‘Are there tables?’ or ‘Are there organisms?’ In other cases, those competent with the concepts in question can engage in trivial reasoning from obvious premises to answer the existence question. So, for example, if conceptual analysis tells us that there is a link between concepts entitling us to reason from ‘the dog is brown’ to infer ‘the dog has the property of brownness’ to ‘there is a property’, then we can make use of that inference to easily answer the question of whether properties exist. To be clear, in the first instance, all that is needed is *competence* with the relevant concepts that we *use* in the relevant observations or inferences. If that is challenged, however, or if the cases are more difficult or borderline cases, explicit conceptual analysis might be employed to determine what it takes for things of the relevant kind to exist, or what rules govern the relevant concept(s), on the basis of which we can justify our claim that the concept is instantiated, or the inference valid.

Apart from its obvious advantage in demystifying the epistemology of metaphysics, another advantage of the conceptualist approach is that it avoids the sense that metaphysics and the natural sciences are rivals—in a rivalry metaphysics seems bound to lose. For it leaves a clear and legitimate role for metaphysics: the primary role of the metaphysician is to engage in conceptual work, while that of the natural scientist is primarily to engage in empirical work (though of course each can profitably learn from the other and take on the opposing role at certain stages). Indeed it was largely in order to respond to the question of what the role of philosophy could be given the success of the empirical sciences that so many early twentieth century philosophers adopted a division of labor view, taking the sciences to be fundamentally engaged in empirical work, while philosophers primarily undertook conceptual work.[[4]](#footnote-5)

So, if we aim to adhere to the deflationist’s demystifying standards, and appeal to nothing more mysterious than conceptual or empirical work in our work in metaphysics, what can we do when we do metaphysics? The descriptive conceptualist gives us an initial answer: one thing we can do is to engage in conceptual work, combined with obvious empirical work or the empirical results of the sciences. Under that rubric, we might attempt analyses of how our concept of freedom works, of its relation to concepts of responsibility, punishment, rationality, consciousness and the like. Or we might engage (with Jackson 1998) in the question of what to say about the world in moral terms, given what we say about it in physical terms. Or we might ask what to say about colors, given what we now know about the science of light, reflectance and vision. We might ask whether apes or elephants count as conscious beings, moral beings, or rational agents, given some analysis of each of these key concepts, combined with recent findings about the brains, behavior, or culture of these animals. All of that is important and useful work we can do, very much in line with the traditional metaphysical work.

Yet an underlying dissatisfaction remains—especially among many metaphysicians—with the idea that that is *all* metaphysics can be up to. For while this approach does well at avoiding the epistemic mysteries of heavyweight metaphysics and carving out a legitimate role for metaphysics *vis a vis* the natural sciences, it is not clear that it can do so well at handling the phenomena of radical and persistent disagreement in metaphysics. Or rather, to be clear: a virtue of the approach is that it seems capable of *resolving* longstanding disagreements, in some cases by simple and obvious conceptual and/or empirical work. But if metaphysical disputes really are resolvable so straightforwardly, what explanation can the deflationist give of why they have *seemed* so intractable, or of why disputes about central metaphysical questions have persisted across the ages?

In some cases, of course, descriptive conceptualists can appeal to the difficulty of analyzing some of our most important concepts (such as *freedom, person,* or *art*), or even to the indeterminacies, vagueness or open-endedness of these concepts, leaving room for competing precisifications or explications. But even then, the objection goes, this makes metaphysical work a matter of shallow and parochial conceptual explication. And so, it is commonly thought, the conceptualist view is unable to capture the felt world-orientation, depth, and importance of traditional debates in metaphysics.

**Prescriptive conceptual work**

There is, however, far more that the deflationist can say than is commonly acknowledged. Even if she aims to limit the proper work of metaphysics to conceptual work (perhaps combined with empirical work), we can do more than simply analyze how our concepts actually work. We also can, and do, work on determining what conceptual scheme we *should* adopt for some purpose or other—doing work in what David Plunkett and Alexis Burgess (2013a, 2013b) have called ‘conceptual ethics’.[[5]](#footnote-6) This needn’t interfere with the epistemic clarity the deflationist aims for, since it still does not take us beyond conceptual and empirical work.

But while there is no doubt that normative conceptual work is something we (according to the deflationist) can legitimately do, there might be more doubt that this can count as doing work in *metaphysics.* Thus, in the work that follows I aim to show two things: first, that it is reasonable to see a great deal of historical work in metaphysics as doing normative or pragmatic conceptual work. Secondly, I aim to make clear the pragmatic advantages that we can get by treating metaphysical work as including normative conceptual work. This involves a sort of dialectical bootstrapping for this paper--for together these form the basis for a pragmatic conceptual argument that the work of metaphysics should be seen as including pragmatic conceptual work.

The idea that at least some metaphysical work is implicitly pragmatic conceptual work is not entirely new of course. Defenders of conceptual analysis have sometimes suggested a pragmatic side to it. David Chalmers notes that verbal issues often have ‘serious practical import’:

If the community counts an act as falling into the extension of ‘torture’ or ‘terrorism’, this may make a grave difference to our attitudes toward that act. As such, there may be a serious practical question about what we *ought* to count as falling into the extension of these terms (Verbal disputes, 2).

But this is generally left as a side note, not further pursued.

Carnap distinguished ‘descriptive’ work in syntax, semantics, and pragmatics from the ‘pure’ work in these areas undertaken as what he called ‘conceptual engineering’ (Carus 2007, 39).[[6]](#footnote-7) Moreover, Carnap famously suggested that what disputing metaphysicians are *doing* is most charitably understood as answering *external* questions, construed as *practical* questions about whether we should make use of the linguistic forms in question (1950/1956, 213). For example:

Those who raise the question of the reality of the thing world itself have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of a practical decision concerning the structure of our language. We have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question. (1950/1956, 207)

And there aregood reasons for thinking that many classic debates in metaphysics can be understood as implicitly involved in pragmatic conceptual work. Consider some odd features of metaphysical debates. First, they are typically not resolvable by empirical means—one cannot just wait for the decisive observation or experiment to determine whether a person can survive loss of memories or to determine whether numbers exist. Some have suggested that these debates are merely verbal disputes—cases in which the dispute is to be resolved not by discovering further empirical facts about the world, but by ‘settling the facts about the meanings of key terms in our community’ or ‘distinguishing key senses of a term’ (Chalmers, 2011, 526). But another odd feature of many metaphysical debates is that, in the eyes of the disputants, they cannot be settled by such methods as these. Thus disputants in serious metaphysical debates typically deny that they are each using the disputed term (‘number’, ‘person’) in a different sense, and deny that their dispute could be resolved even if work in linguistics or experimental philosophy showed definitively how the term is used in our community.[[7]](#footnote-8) The disputants, of course, think that this is because their debate is about the *real metaphysical* facts, not about our words or concepts. But as we have seen, this position leads to grave epistemic difficulties, a rivalry with science, and a despairing skepticism. In my view there is a better way to account for these features of classic metaphysical debates—a way that preserves their felt depth, worldliness, and importance.

These odd features of metaphysical disputes are also the hallmarks of what David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013) have called ‘metalinguistic negotiations’: 1. They don’t go away even if the disputants agree on all other ‘facts’—they can’t be empirically resolved just by correcting misinformation or adding empirical information; 2. They don’t go away even if the disputants agree about how the word is *actually* used, or are given full empirical information about how the word is used. 3. They don’t go away even if disputants recognize that they are using the term differently. A metalinguistic negotiation is involved when speakers *use* a term with the pragmatic function of negotiating how (or perhaps whether) that very term *ought to be* used (2013, 15). So, for example, consider a debate among friends watching the Olympics about whether figure skating is a sport. The dispute is not about any of the ‘facts’ about what figures skaters do, what sorts of training and skills are required, or how the competitions are judged. Disputants might agree about all that. One might interpret the disputants as using the term ‘sport’ in different ways (one of whom will apply it where ‘artistic impression’ scores play a role and the other won’t) and each speaking a truth in their own idiolect. But even if that is pointed out to them, they will not give up the dispute as merely verbal and go home. Similarly, even if we take them both (owing to semantic deference) to use the term with the same, public meaning, and could appeal to data from linguistics or experimental philosophy to show that (given actual usage) figure skating *does* (or doesn’t)meet the relevant criteria, that would not end the dispute. For regardless of whether or not we see the speakers as literally asserting conflicting propositions, their real dispute arises at the level of what is pragmatically communicated. In uttering ‘figure skating is/is not a sport’ each is *pragmatically communicating* views about whether the term ‘sport’ *should* be applied to figure skating. And such disputes may be very much worth having. For how we use words *matters,* both given their relations to other aspects of our conceptual scheme, and to our non-verbal behavior. Treating figure skating as a sport, for example, is connected to a range of types of societal honors and rewards—to appearing in the Olympics, to receiving sponsorships and television coverage, to honoring its practitioners in all the ways athletes are honored. What is at stake in arguments about whether figure skating is a sport, then, is a range of *normative* issues about how the skaters, fans, competitions, etc. *are to be treated*.

Once metalinguistic disputes are identified as a category, it is easy to see that they abound in our ordinary debates. Disputes about whether waterboarding is torture, whether the Oklahoma City bombing was terrorism, whether alcoholism is a disease, whether autism is a disability, and more can all be understood on this model.[[8]](#footnote-9)

But on what grounds can we advocate for changes in the way our terms or concepts ought to be used? The grounds for pressing one view or another are at bottom pragmatic. Often the grounds—made explicit—would involve an appeal to the *function* those terms have for us—and to what rules for using the term would best serve that function. Consider a daughter who says ‘my parents are Bob and Jim’. Even if she lives in a state that does not permit gay marriage, she needn’t just be seen as saying something trivially false given the legal definition in play. Instead, she may be seen as *negotiating* a revision in the use of a term by *using* it in an extended way—and perhaps even by refusing to use it in its more limited legal definition. Made explicit, the grounds for extending the term ‘parent’ to include both members of same-sex couples who raise a child together might naturally appeal to the function of the term ‘parent’. Presumably that function is to mark certain close relationships and grant them the legal rights, responsibilities, and protections that we think should govern such close care-giving relationships, in which case the term can better fulfill its function if its meaning is extended from the old legal definition to a new one. The case of the daughter who *uses* the term ‘parent’ to negotiate such a change in the rules is not unlike cases of civil disobedience where protestors negotiated the change of rules about who could sit at the front of the bus by *using* the bus in ways conflicting with the old rules. By sitting in the front of the bus, Rosa Parks didn’t *say* that the rules should be changed; she *pragmatically* advocated for their change by refusing to follow the old rules. Similarly, by using the term ‘parent’ in saying that Bob and Jim are her parents, the daughter doesn’t *say* that the rules for use of ‘parent’ should be changed, she *pragmatically* advocates for their change by refusing to follow the old rules, where this change might be explicitly justified by appeal to the term’s function.

Many traditional debates in metaphysics can be understood using the model of metalinguistic negotiation—as involved in *using* the terms as a way of pragmatically negotiating how—or sometimes whether—certain words or concepts *ought* to be used. There is no need, of course, for the deflationist to hold that *all* metaphysical debates fit this model: the deflationist is free to treat other legitimate metaphysical work as engaged in more directly descriptive conceptual work, or to dismiss still other debates and positions as based on confusions. Nonetheless, the idea of metalinguistic negotiation—and of pragmatic conceptual work more generally—can be used to *broaden* the options available to the deflationist in giving an account of what metaphysics has done and can legitimately do.

For example, in core metaphysical debates such as debates about what art is or what the conditions for personal identity are, the disputants can often be seen as using a term as a way of negotiating how it *should* be used, given its function. John Locke, for example, argues for a consciousness-based view of personal identity in part by noting that ‘person’ is a ‘forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit, and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and happiness, and misery’ (1690, 220)). But, he argues, we are only rightly punished for actions we can attribute to our same consciousness, and so personal identity is to be measured by a continuity of consciousness, not of body. ‘In this personal identity is founded all the right and justice of reward and punishment’ (1690, 216). Locke is well aware that this might not mirror how we *actually* think of persons, or of rightful punishment—but he is not put off by that; he is more interested in how we *should* use the term in order that it fulfill its forensic function. The idea that ‘person’ is a ‘forensic term’ is an insight that, more recently, Lynne Baker uses in motivating her view that ‘*person* is a moral category’, so that a person cannot be identified with the mere body of which she is constituted (2000, 8). Baker similarly appeals to what ‘matters to and about us’—namely our first-person perspective—in arguing that persons should not be identified with our bodies, and that only by acknowledging the importance of the first-person perspective to personhood can we employ a concept of personhood that can bear the needed weight of attributing moral and rational agency (2000, 147-8). In short, we can see certain views in this area—expressed in the object language, as views about what persons are—as pragmatically pressing for views about how we *should* use the term ‘person’, driven (explicitly or tacitly) by views about what we need the concept of *person* to do for us: to capture what is important to us, to be usable in attributions of responsibility and agency, and so on.

On a different topic, consider David Davies, who argues that a work of art (of any type) is really a ‘performance that specifies a focus of appreciation’ (2004, 146). On this view, Mary Cassatt’s *The Boating Party* isnot a work on canvas, hanging on the walls of the National Gallery of Art, but rather a performance undertaken by Cassatt in 1893-4. To critics who would say that this is just false—even a category mistake—given a conceptual analysis of ‘work of painting’, Davies argues that what we want out of an ontology of art is a view that coheres with our critical practices—‘for the purposes of the philosophy of art, an artwork is whatever functions as the unit of criticism and appreciation’ (2004, 188)—or rather, with those critical practices we *ought* to have:

It is not our actual practice as it stands that is to serve as the tribunal against which ontologies of art are to be assessed… but, rather, a theoretical representation of the norms that *should* govern the judgments that critics make concerning ‘the ways in which works are to be judged and appreciated’ (2004, 143)

He goes on to argue that our appreciative interest in art (often) is and (always) should be interest in ‘a generative performance whereby a focus of appreciation is specified’ (2004, 199), giving us reason to accept that works of art are performances rather than products, in order to fulfill the function the term ‘artwork’ has in philosophy of art.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Let us revisit the question ‘What can we do, then, when we do metaphysics?’ If we uphold the deflationist’s demystifying standards, one thing we can legitimately do, as we have already seen, is to engage in descriptive conceptual analysis—combined sometimes with empirical work. But now we can go much further. For even deflationists needn’t hold that a metaphysician’s work should be limited to *descriptive* conceptual work; it can also involve (and *has* often involved) *prescriptive* conceptual work. And this conceptual work may be conducted in the object language—not by discussing how ‘person’ is or should be used, but by discussing what *persons are*. The extent of the relevant negotiations involved in the pragmatic work may vary greatly—whether it simply involves pressing for one way of precisifying a vague term (or a term that is indeterminate in some of its areas of application), or involves advocating for more substantial changes in the ways a term is to be used—or indeed whether it is to be used at all. When (following the pattern of metalinguistic negotiation) disputants press their views by *using* the contested terms themselves (in the object language), they are likely to express their views in metaphysical terms, as views about when two individuals count as the same person, or about whether there is free will. But such uses of terms may serve not to describe surprising metaphysical discoveries (or to report obvious facts), but rather to advocate for views about how the terms are *to be* used, on pragmatic grounds—e.g. that such changes in the ways our terms are to be used would better enable them to fulfill their function. Such proposals—if made explicit—would also presuppose a kind of descriptive analysis of the *function* the term serves, so that one could thereby more clearly see that the proposed change in practice would better fulfill that function. Thus, so far, we can say that on this model the metaphysician may engage in descriptive conceptual analysis, descriptive functional analysis, and normative conceptual analysis (often driven by the descriptive functional analysis). In each case, these may also be profitably combined with empirical work. For it is often an empirical matter whether the changes advocated will actually enable the term to better fulfill its function. Moreover, technological and empirical changes in the world often challenge the boundaries of our concepts, forcing us to make new conceptual choices or reevaluate old ones (consider debates about whether persons can survive replacements of various parts with artificial substitutes, or about what the identity conditions are for works of internet art).

But this still is not all that metaphysics can do—metaphysicians needn’t be limited to recommending that we alter the way our terms are to be used so that they can better fulfill their *actual* functions. More deeply, some recommendations may (whether tacitly or explicitly) involve suggestions that the *function* of the term itself be changed; or that the term and its traditional function be dropped altogether. Foucaultian critiques often suggest that the function of our terms is different from what we might have thought—for example, that the function of ‘madness’ is not so much to serve as a medical diagnostic description as to serve as a means of social control and marginalization. Those convinced by such critiques will have good reason to reject terms like ‘madness’—a move that might itself be expressed in the object language as the view that there is no such thing as madness (or that this is not a natural kind). This kind of normative functional analysis has also played a crucial role in work on race. Sally Haslanger, for example, has developed a social constructionist understanding of race, according to which races should be identified with racialized groups, where “a group is racialized if and only if its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension… and the group is ‘marked’ as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region” (2012, 384). Whether or not this matches anyone’s current or past concept of race is beside the point. For the point, according to Haslanger, is to engage in what she calls ‘ameliorative’ conceptual analysis, asking ‘What is the point of having the concept in question…? What concept (if any) would do the work best?’ (2012, 386). The function of older race concepts might have been to falsely legitimate differential treatments of certain groups of individuals by presuming to track a ‘racial essence’ predictive of behavior or abilities. But we can reject that function and recommend a new function for racial terms, in enabling us to diagnose the source of illusions about race and motivate social change (2012, 385). In this way, we may not only engage in descriptive work in conceptual and functional analysis, but also in *normative* work at both the conceptual and functional levels.

**A pragmatic argument for this conception of metaphysics**

The work of this paper can be seen (in a kind of dialectical bootstrapping) as itself engaged in a kind of negotiation for how to understand the work of metaphysics: that we (deflationists) should treat the work of metaphysics as including pragmatic conceptual work. For, as I have argued, this preserves core continuities with traditional work and methods of argumentation in metaphysics. Moreover, as I shall now argue, it also brings about important pragmatic advantages.

What is the function of the concept of metaphysics? Plausibly, the concept functions to pick out a historical tradition of work, and also to identify it as a distinct area of inquiry, capable of contributing to human knowledge—an area we can work in and that it is worthwhile to pursue. To do this, it is desirable for our concept of metaphysics to preserve continuities with historical work (both with *what* was done and *how* it was done), and to mark out an area of inquiry that is not ‘killed’ by rivalry with the sciences,[[10]](#footnote-11) nor so difficult that it should lead us to skeptically abandoning the project, and that is potentially worthwhile.

Broadening the conceptualist approach to include both descriptive and prescriptive conceptual work at the levels of both meaning and function can preserve the virtues of the traditional conceptualist approach in these areas while avoiding its perceived difficulties. The expanded conceptualist approach retains the epistemic advantages of conceptualism over heavyweight metaphysics, for it still demystifies the methods of metaphysics by appealing to nothing more mysterious than empirical and conceptual work, (now including under that both descriptive and normative conceptual work).[[11]](#footnote-12)

The expanded conceptualist approach also, like the traditional conceptualist approach, avoids the problem of a rivalry with science. In fact, it does even better at responding to the threat of a rivalry with science. For we can still appeal to a division of labor, with the natural sciences focused primarily on empirical work, and metaphysics on conceptual. But thinking of metaphysical work as engaged in analyzing meanings raises threat of another rivalry. When a young Ryle suggested to his tutor H. J. Paton that the proper role of philosophy lies in analyzing meanings, Paton reportedly replied ‘Ah, Ryle, how *exactly* do you distinguish between philosophy and lexicography?’ (Ryle 1970, 6). By expanding conceptual work to include the normative as well as the descriptive, we can more clearly distinguish metaphysical work from the work linguists or psychologists do in discerning what rules our terms or concepts actually do follow. By bringing out the normative side of metaphysical work we can also appeal to a task that is widely accepted as something the natural sciences, taken alone, are ill suited to do. In answering Hawking’s claim that ‘philosophy is dead’ since its questions are better answered by the sciences, we can then point to the important role philosophy can and does play in a wide range of normative areas.

The expanded conceptualist approach also has the virtue of accounting for the felt depth and importance of metaphysics. For we are not left thinking of metaphysics as engaged only in resolving shallow parochial issues about our language or conceptual scheme. Even where metaphysical disputes are engaged in conceptual negotiation, they are not properly thought of as merely verbal disputes, trivial, or just ‘about words’. When we say ‘a person at time 1 is only identical with a person at time 2 if there is a continuity of consciousness’, for example, the literal semantic content is world-oriented (not about our language or concepts). While the pragmatic content is about how (or whether) the relevant terms ought to be used, the significance of that choice is again worldly—for example, to do with how we are to assign praise, blame, and punishment. In short, the conceptual choices we negotiate for in expressing metaphysical views are not merely verbal issues—they matter because what we call ‘art’, or a ‘person’, or a ‘free action’, has deep and significant impact on our way of life.

Finally, the expanded conceptualist approach can do a better job than the traditional conceptualist approach of accounting for the presence of apparently intractable disagreements in metaphysics. For even if we can easily settle the ‘internal’ questions, difficult questions remain that involve normative disputes about how our terms or concepts should work, what rules they should follow, and what purposes they should serve. Moreover, the concepts at issue in classic metaphysical disputes are among those most central to our lives—concepts such as *person, art,* and *freedom.* How we (ought to) use these concepts is tied to deep issues about what we ought to value in art, when we ought to hold one another responsible, feel guilt and resentment, and so on. The difficulty and depth of such disputes then shouldn’t be surprising—for it is symptomatic of the difficulties of working out and reconciling differences in our normative views about what we should value, how we should live and what we should do.

Now some might think this counts as little progress. For resolving normative issues is itself notoriously difficult. Thus the move from thinking of metaphysical debates as epistemically metaphysical, to thinking of them as implicitly normative, might be thought to take us from the frying pan to the fire.[[12]](#footnote-13)

But the challenge here was not to *resolve* the debates (that we can do simply enough at the internal level), but rather to account for why the metaphysical debates have been so persistent, why they *seem* so irresoluble and intractable, and why they might nonetheless be worthwhile. And the idea here is that we can account for the apparent irresolubility of metaphysical debates by seeing the deep normative element that may be involved in them, leaving them as hard to resolve as many other pragmatic and normative questions. There is, however, an important twist here: seeing metaphysical debates as very difficult matters of discovering hidden facts that are ‘epistemically metaphysical’ might well lead to skepticism, thinking that such facts are forever opaque to us so that we may as well give up trying, and engage our efforts elsewhere. But if we see the difficulty of many metaphysical questions as instead manifesting the difficulties in addressing deep *normative* questions, we shall be much less inclined to think that the right—or even an acceptable—response is just to give up. And we shall be better able to see why—at least in many, central cases—working on them is important, not at all pointless or a waste of time.

**Conclusion**

Deflationary metaontological approaches are clearly advantageous over their heavyweight counterparts in their ability to demystify the epistemology of metaphysics, avoid worries about rivalry with science, and avoid falling into a kind of skeptical torpor that might arise from thinking we may never discover the answers to our metaphysical questions. Yet deflating metaphysics by thinking it as fundamentally conceptual work threatens to make metaphysical work *too* easy, leaving it unable to account for the depth and persistence of debates in metaphysics. I have argued here, however, that more options remain for the deflationist than are commonly acknowledged. For metaphysical work may include not just *descriptive* work in conceptual analysis or functional analysis, but also *prescriptive* work in determining what concepts we should have, how they should work, and what functions they should serve. Such a broadened conceptualist account of what we can do when we do metaphysics has promise of preserving the advantages of traditional conceptualist views, while also giving us a clearly improved account of why disagreements in metaphysics tend to persist, why they are important (and not just shallow verbal matters), and why it would be a mistake to simply give up work on them. Even if we retain the deflationary standpoint and appeal to nothing more than conceptual and empirical work, we can allow that there is plenty of useful and important work to do, when we do metaphysics.

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1. Conceptual analysis has of course been challenged by those suspicious of analyticity and all related notions, impressed by semantic externalism, or working in experimental philosophy. For defenses of analyticity see Boghossian (1996), and my (2007a, Chapter 2) and (2015, Chapter 7). Defenses of conceptualist methods against Quinean attacks and externalism may be found in Jackson (1998). For a defense of conceptualist methods against attacks from experimental philosophy, see my (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This is of course a contentious approach to the modal questions of metaphysics, but it is one I have argued for at length elsewhere (2007b, 2013) and the concern here is not to argue for this sort of conceptualist approach, but rather to show ways in which it can and should be broadened. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See Chapter 1 of my (2015) for discussion of Carnap’s distinction and its relation to the easy ontological approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. In Chapter 2 of *Language, Truth and Logic,* Ayer gives a classic defense of the view that philosophy consists in analysis, and argues that ‘the majority of those who are commonly supposed to have been great philosophers were primarily… analysts’ (1952, 52). For a brief historical overview, see my (2015, 4-13). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Matti Eklund (forthcoming) makes a related argument that philosophy should be seen not as conceptual analysis but as ‘conceptual engineering’. His motivations are a bit different—arising from the thought that our extant concepts might not be the ‘best conceptual tools for describing and theorizing about the relevant aspects of reality’. Instead, he argues we should engage in conceptual engineering, where he thinks of this as a matter of studying ‘what concept best plays the theoretical role of our concept [e.g.] of knowledge and what features this concept has’ (14). Much of this may be compatible with what I say above. But (in line with functional pluralism) I want to leave open that the functions of our concepts need not always be seen as aiming to describe and theorize about aspects of reality, and we need not always be concerned (merely) with theoretical role. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The notion of pragmatic conceptual work relied on here, however, is broader than the Carnapian notion of conceptual engineering, to the extent that the latter is taken to focus on explication, in the sense of replacing a vague concept (typically of ordinary language) by a more precise one for use in science. That is one sort of pragmatic conceptual work, but I want to leave room for other sorts, aiming to serve a variety of scientific, social, moral or other purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. In my (forthcoming) I argue that the verbal disputes model is not the best way for deflationists to conceive of metaphysical debates. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The waterboarding case is discussed in Plunkett and Sundell (2013). See also mention of the other cases of metalinguistic negotiation in my (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Unfortunately there is not space for other examples here. Elsewhere (forthcoming) I suggest how other metaphysical debates, e.g. about the persistence conditions for works of art, identity conditions for works of music, the existence of free will or of races, may be understood on this model. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Karen Bennett also identifies as two constraints on a proper characterization of metaphysics as that it ‘must to some extent respect the actual practices of actual metaphysicians’ and ‘must go some distance towards distinguishing it from science’ (2015, section 4), parallel to the first two desirable features identified above. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. For those who worry that the epistemology of normative facts introduces new mysteries, see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Of course if one were a heavyweight realist about normative facts, this might raise parallel epistemic issues. But the metaontological deflationist is unlikely to ally herself with that position, and plenty of alternative options remain, e.g. in the Blackburn/Gibbard tradition. (Moreover, even those who are heavyweight realists about the moral facts might find less plausible the idea that there are normative facts to be discovered about what conceptual scheme we should adopt for various purposes.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)