**Research Problems and Methods in Metaphysics**

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The problems of metaphysics seem, at least on the surface, to be among the deepest and most important questions of philosophy. Thus, for example, Richard Taylor writes “metaphysics is a foundation of philosophy… One’s philosophical thinking, if long pursued, tends to resolve itself into basic problems of metaphysics” (1992, 2), while Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa call metaphysics “the most central and general subdivision of philosophy” (1995, xiii). Though the problems metaphysicians work on are superficially diverse, most may without too much distortion be divided into three major categories: existence questions, relational questions, and modal questions.

Questions regarding what exists belong to the sub-discipline of metaphysics known as ontology. Some existence questions, e.g. “Does God exist?”, “Does matter exist?” have long been at the heart of metaphysics. More recently, especially over the past sixty years or so (under the dominance of a neo-Quinean picture of metaphysics I will say more about below), existence questions have proliferated and taken a more central place in metaphysics, as metaphysicians aim to articulate and defend competing ‘ontologies’—considered as views about what does (and does not) exist (or, alternatively, about what there is) [[1]](#endnote-1). Thus among contemporary research problems pursued in metaphysics we now find not only traditional existence questions like “Does God exist?”, but also questions about the existence of entities seldom questioned by non-philosophers, e.g.: “Do tables and chairs exist?”, “Do persons exist?”, “Do events exist?”, “Does consciousness exist?”, and even existence questions raised about philosophical entities unfamiliar to non-philosophers, e.g. “Do temporal parts exist?”, “Do mereological sums exist?”, “Do universals exist?”, and so on. Those doing ontology generally take themselves to be interested not merely in answering individual existence questions, taken separately, but also to be attempting to formulate an overall ontology that meets certain theoretic goals better than its competitors: goals such as empirical adequacy, explanatory power, unity, and—prominently—parsimony.

Metaphysicians are also typically concerned with relational questions; in Sellars’ phrase, metaphysicians aim “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (1963, p.1). How is, say, a statue related to the clay it is made of? Are they identical, or connected by some kind of ‘constitution’ relation, or what? More generally, how do such things as conscious beings, and social and cultural entities such as artifacts, works of art, and nations, relate to the objects described by the physical sciences? Are there different ‘levels of reality’, with the entities described by physics (perhaps) on the lowest level, and artifacts, social and cultural objects, or minds on higher levels? If so, what are the relations between entities of different levels? Do the ‘higher level’ entities really exist? May they be ‘reduced to’ lower level entities, or considered to provide no ‘real addition of being’ with respect to them? In the earlier days of analytic philosophy, the goal was typically to reduce ‘higher-level’ entities to the lower; as reductions proved problematic, talk turned more, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, to supervenience; more recently, there has been a turn to looking for lower-level entities to serve as ‘truthmakers’ for statements of higher-level facts, or looking for the ‘ontological grounds’ for higher level entities (about this more below). The list of options has been ever expanding, and of course has introduced new questions about what precisely the target relation (whether of reduction, supervenience, truthmaking or grounding) consists in. Relational questions have not been confined to asking about relations between social and cultural entities and those of the natural sciences, however. A perennial set of ontological questions also involves questions about the relations among entities of the most basic ontological categories, e.g. objects, facts, events, universal properties, or property instances (tropes). So, e.g. questions such as “Are objects just bundles of tropes?”, “Are properties just sets of possible objects?” and “Which is more basic: objects or facts?” may also be counted as relational questions.

Metaphysics is not only traditionally concerned with what exists, and with how things are related, but also with questions about the *natures* of things of various sorts. Thus other important problems in metaphysics are questions about the natures, for example, of persons, artifacts or works of art: what are their essential properties? What does it take for something to be a person, an artifact, or a work of art? Are humans, or artifacts, or works of art, essentially tied to their origins? Related questions concern the identity and persistence conditions for things of various sorts, e.g. metaphysicians writing about personal identity, for example, often aim to determine under what conditions persons A and B would be identical; and from the time of the ancients, metaphysicians have been concerned with puzzles about the conditions under which ships or other artifacts persist over time. All of these questions about natures, identity and persistence conditions are *modal* questions: questions about the properties an object *must* have to be of a certain type, about what it *would take* for there to be something of a given type, about the conditions under which individuals *would* be identical, or under which a given thing *would or would not* persist.[[2]](#endnote-2) Under this heading also come questions not about *whether* something of a given sort exists, but about *what it would take* for something of a given sort (or for an individual) to exist: about the existence *conditions* for things of various kinds. Questions about whether or not colors, numbers, or moral facts are ‘mind-dependent’, for example, are modal questions about whether the existence of minds is necessary for the existence of things of these other sorts.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This may not capture everything metaphysicians deal with, and the tripartite classification is certainly not the only way of dividing up the problems of metaphysics. Nonetheless, it provides, I think, a fair survey of the sorts of problems that have come to occupy center stage in metaphysical debates over the past sixty years or so, during the post-positivist revival of metaphysics; and the division into three will provide a useful organization for considering the methodological issues below—as similar methodological issues arise, e.g., for all existence questions, and for all modal questions, despite superficial dissimilarities between, e.g. questions about identity conditions and questions about essences (both of which are classified as modal questions).

Now, if those are among the central questions of metaphysics, the next question is: how are we to go about answering them? While the methodology to be employed in the natural sciences has been clear and consistent for some time, the question of what methods are proper to answering metaphysical questions has become only more contested and more obscured over the past century.

A standard response—if you interrupt metaphysicians in the heat of a first-order debate to enquire about their methodology—is to brush off the question, saying that to answer metaphysical questions we simply ‘think really hard’ and ‘see who has the best arguments’. But this alone is no kind of answer to a very real and pressing question, for it only leads us back further to the underlying questions: what *sorts* of arguments are and are not appropriate, or suitable for providing support for metaphysical theses, say, about what exists, about identity and persistence conditions, or about the relation between higher and lower level entities? Do purely *a priori* arguments based on thought experiments and/or conceptual analysis provide the proper support? Or should we be suspicious of the idea that ‘intuitions’ about imagined cases can be truth-tracking at all, or that conceptual analysis can tell us anything about what the world is like? Is empirical enquiry relevant, and can it alone be sufficient to tell us what ontology to adopt, or what the natures of things of various kinds are? What role, if any, do the theoretic virtues play in justifying the adoption of a metaphysical theory: do metaphysical theories aim to do the same sort of job as scientific theories, so that they may be evaluated on similar grounds, according to their theoretic virtues? Moreover, if we do take metaphysical questions to be answerable empirically, further questions arise about the sorts of empirical evidence that are relevant: if we want to know about the essence of a given kind of thing, say, persons or artifacts, do we study the things themselves, or should we, with experimental philosophers, undertake empirical study of those who use the corresponding terms or concepts?

None of these methodological questions are easy to answer, all are highly contested; yet how we answer them makes an enormous difference to how we go about entering into metaphysical debates and evaluating the merits of various proposals. Perhaps it’s no wonder, then, that the controversies in metaphysics show so little hope of being resolved, and that the answers to metaphysical questions seem to keep proliferating and diversifying rather than converging on (what we hope is) the truth. The methodological problems are crucial, since without clarity about what we are doing in metaphysics, what sorts of consideration are and are not legitimate to resolving metaphysical debates, we can make little progress in adjudicating metaphysical disputes (at least where the disputants do, as is often the case, explicitly or tacitly employ different methodologies). These obscurities at the methodological level, and the proliferation in opinions that has resulted, have led some to doubt that these questions of metaphysics are as deep an important as they seemed. Indeed, methodological doubts have led some to treat many core metaphysical questions as pseudo-questions, as poorly formed and unanswerable questions, or as trivially answerable and so not suitable subjects for deep metaphysical debates.

While many practicing metaphysicians still prefer to brush off methodological problems, over the past ten years or so (as the post-positivist euphoria among those who wanted to just practice metaphysics unencumbered has died down, and as skeptics and deflationists have raised new worries) there has come to be an increasing sense of the importance of returning to examine these methodological issues. Tim Williamson, for example, speaks of a “current tendency towards increasing methodological self-consciousness in philosophy” (2007, 8); a tendency that can be witnessed in the prominent books and collections on the topic that have recently come forth or are in preparation (e.g. Chalmers et al 2009, Williamson 2007, McGinn forthcoming, Sider forthcoming). The clearest way to see how and why the confusion over the methods for addressing metaphysical debates has developed is to take a brief look back at the history of metaphysics—so I will pause now to provide a bit of that history, and then return to assess the current state of the debate.

1. **Methodology in Metaphysics: A Very Brief History**

In the days of Rationalism, philosophers doing metaphysics thought of themselves as aiming to discover fundamental truths about the world and its structure, using *a priori* reasoning: thus, for example, Descartes argued for the existence of God, and for the existence of two fundamentally different kinds of substance, from his armchair alone.

Empiricists grew suspicious of these lofty claims, and sought to clarify the methods for resolving metaphysical disputes. Some traditional questions of metaphysics were held to be resolvable empirically if at all, whether through external observation or internal observation of our own psychological processes. So, for example the question of the existence of God was thought to be resolvable (if at all) by empirical arguments about whether or not God is the best causal explanation of the (coming into) existence of the world, or about its apparent ‘design’. Other questions of metaphysics were taken to be resolvable by way of grasping ‘relations among ideas’ rather than ‘matters of fact’, e.g., through examining relations among our ideas, we can see that moral responsibility presupposes liberty in (and only in) the sense of doing what one wills, without external hindrance (Hume 1748/1977). Purported metaphysical questions that cannot be resolved through either of these means were considered dubious. Thus, in what may have been the most famous early attack on rationalist metaphysics, Hume wrote: “If we take in our hand any volume of divinity, or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames. For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion” (1748/1977, 114).

Kant also raised suspicions against traditional metaphysics, as illegitimately attempting to acquire knowledge about the things in themselves, an attempt which reaches beyond our cognitive powers. His transcendental approach gave a new way of understanding metaphysical questions about, e.g. the structure of space and time or the nature of freedom neither by using experience to examine the world, nor by examining our concepts, but rather by ferreting out the transcendental presuppositions required for our experience of the phenomenal world to be possible, or for our moral concepts to have application.

As the empirical sciences continued to develop, to become methodologically self-conscious, and to break off from philosophy (ending with the separation between philosophy and psychology around the end of the 19th century), philosophers became increasingly concerned with methodological questions. The question of what philosophy is, how philosophy differs from science, how we should do it, and what sort of knowledge we might hope to gain from it, as Ryle puts it, didn’t “begin seriously to worry the general run of philosophers” until right around the beginning of the 20th century (1971, 366). But by the middle of the twentieth century, methodological concerns had become far more prominent—even a core obsession for many philosophers. Thus Ryle says of philosophers of his generation “We philosophers were in for a near-lifetime of enquiry into our own title to be enquirers” (1970, 10).

**1.1 The methodological crisis for metaphysics**

In the early twentieth century, the dominant answers to the question “what are the proper roles and methods of philosophy?” deflated the goals and ambitions of metaphysics. The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle, as heirs to the Empiricist tradition, drew a clear distinction between metaphysics and science. Forms of traditional metaphysics that involved claims to knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense were roundly rejected as nonsensical. A. J. Ayer, who visited the Vienna Circle and aimed to promote its views to an English-speaking audience, put the point as follows: “no statement which refers to a ‘reality’ transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance from which it must follow that the labors of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense” (1946/1952, 34). That is, on this view many of the statements (and debates) of traditional metaphysics are not *false*, but *nonsensical*.

On the positivist view, philosophy and science were seen as having distinct roles and distinct methods: Philosophy is concerned with a kind of linguistic or meaning analysis, which reveals analytic/necessary truths that are independent of any empirical assumptions; science, by contrast, is engaged in empirical enquiry aiming to discover matters of fact (Ayer 1946/1952, 57). Metaphysics was considered acceptable only to the extent that it could be seen not as attempting to state truths about the world, but only as concerned only with *analytic* questions*.*[[4]](#endnote-4)(And indeed, Ayer takes some pains to argue that a great deal of historical work in metaphysics—especially that of Empiricists such as Locke, Berkeley and Hume—can be understood as engaged in analysis in this sense (1946/1952, 51-55)). Analytic statements, as Ayer understood them,are tautologies that make no factual claims about the world. They are knowable *a priori*, express necessary truths, and are true just given the meanings of the terms involved. Empirical statements, by contrast,are true or false in virtue of both the meanings of the terms involved and the way the world is; they are attempts to describe the world. Thus Ayer would declare: “the function of philosophy is wholly critical” (1946/1952, 48)—the philosopher must “confine himself to works of clarification and analysis” (1946/1952, 51), where “the philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them” (1946/1952, 57).

With this view came an answer to the problem of how we can acquire knowledge of modal truths. Necessary truths positivists held to be analytic truths that ‘illustrate’ or ‘convey’ the conventions or the rules of use for our terms or concepts—holding a view that came to be known (perhaps unfortunately) as ‘modal conventionalism’. Analytic propositions “simply record our determination to use words in a certain fashion. We cannot deny them without infringing the conventions which are presupposed by our very denial, and so falling into self-contradiction. And this is the sole ground of their necessity” (1946/1952, 84). Thus the modal portions of metaphysics (on this understanding) may be done by way of a form of conceptual or linguistic analysis that can help reveal or make explicit those analytic truths—which may, despite their analyticity, be complex and difficult for limited beings like ourselves to recognize.

What then about existence questions? Rudolf Carnap, one of the most important members of the Vienna Circle and proponents of logical positivism, famously argued that the existence questions of ontology could be understood in one of two ways. They may be *internal* questions—questions such as “Is there a prime number between 16 and 20?” or “Are there (still) any ivory-billed woodpeckers?”. Internal questions, Carnap held, are asked within (or using) a linguistic framework, and the answers may be “found either by purely logical methods or by empirical methods, depending upon whether the framework is a logical or a factual one” (1946/199, 14). That is, answers to questions like “Is there a prime number between 16 and 20?” may be found by mathematical reasoning; answers to “Are there (still) ivory-billed woodpeckers” may be found by empirical methods (e.g. placing motion-detector activated cameras around the woods of Arkansas). But existence questions may also be understood as *external* questions: questions about the existence or reality of *the system of entities as a whole,* e.g. “Do numbers exist?” “Do material objects exist?”.These external questions are more like the existence questions that exercise metaphysicians; they are, on Carnap’s view, questions asked outside of a linguistic framework: “They purport to assert the existence of entities of the kind in question not merely within a given language, but, so to speak, before a language has been constructed” (1963, 871).

As mentioned above, internal existence questions may be answered straightforwardly, either through empirical or analytic means (or a combination of these). External questions, Carnap held, taken literally, are ill-formed pseudo-questions. We can make sense of them only to the extent that we can understand them as disguised practical questions, involving practical decisions about “whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question” (1946/1999, 14). We should “replace the ontological theses about the reality or irreality of certain entities [expressed in answer to external questions], theses which we regard as pseudo-theses, by proposals or decisions concerning the use of certain languages. Thus realism is replaced by the practical decision to use the reistic [thing-] language, phenomenalism by the decision to use only the phenomenal language…” (1963, 869). In sum, then, to the extent that the philosopher has anything to contribute to internal debates about existence, it is not by providing some kind of deep insight into what ‘really’ exists, but merely by clarifying the question by using analysis to determine what it might take for entities of the relevant sort to exist; to the extent that the philosopher has anything legitimate to contribute to resolving external questions, the contribution will take the form of pragmatic arguments about what language to adopt (for a given purpose), not of arguments that can purport to show that numbers, material objects, or other disputed entities ‘really’ do or do not exist.

Later analytic philosophers, especially in the ordinary language tradition, would grow skeptical about the idea that we could uncover true analyses of many of our most central philosophical expressions; but nonetheless the idea remained that (to the extent that it was legitimate, dealing in sense rather than nonsense) philosophy had a role completely separate from that of the natural sciences. Its role was largely seen as distinguishing sense from nonsense, and avoiding mistakes that arise from being misled by language. Thus by the time he wrote *The Concept of Mind,* Ryle came to see philosophy as primarily concerned with avoiding mistakes (which lead to absurdities) that arise from mistaking the ‘logical geography of our concepts’—avoiding category mistakes by avoiding misconceptions about how certain terms work. The Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* similarly held that philosophy is not concerned with discoveries of facts at all, but with avoiding nonsense; “The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language” (1953/1958, 119). On Wittgenstein’s view, philosophy was to provide a kind of ‘therapy’, a ‘cure for diseases of the understanding’. “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (1953/1958, 109).

Despite the differences among positivists, ordinary language philosophers, and other early twentieth century philosophers,[[5]](#endnote-5) philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century presented a rather unified front in terms of their basic understanding of the role of philosophy, its methodology, and relation to the sciences. On the dominant view, the roles of philosophy and the sciences were seen as separate: philosophy is an *a priori* study engaged in conceptual or meaning analysis, not in the discovery of matters of fact; science is an *empirical* study concerned with matters of fact. Points of controversy tended to concern not that general picture, but rather details about how we should understand the meanings involved (whether we should take them as Platonic entities, as rules of use, or what; indeed whether we should hypostatize meanings as ‘objects’ at all), and over what meaning analysis involved (whether we could hope for positive analyses of key terms in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, or could only hope for a critical role in avoiding problems and confusions engendered by misleading forms of language). In any case, for the first half of the twentieth century, to the extent that metaphysics was seen as legitimate at all, it was only seen as engaged in some sort of linguistic or conceptual analysis—whether in a fine-grained way (with focus on particular concepts such as knowledge or freedom) or in the broader spirit of what P. F. Strawson called ‘descriptive metaphysics’, which aims “to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure” (1963*,* xiii). What was uniformly rejected was what we may call ‘serious metaphysics’, understood as a metaphysical discipline that aims to provide knowledge of deep features of reality, without its methods being simply those of conceptual or linguistic analysis (nor even these combined with the empirical results from the natural sciences).

In this context, we can see quite clearly how Tim Williamson can say, of many of the recent giants of metaphysics such as Kripke, Lewis, van Inwagen, Armstrong and Fine—none of whom would think of themselves as engaged only or even primarily in conceptual analysis— “On the traditional grand narrative schemes in the history of philosophy, this activity must be a throwback to pre-Kantian metaphysics: it ought not to be happening—but it is” (2007, 19).[[6]](#endnote-6)

Why is it?

**1.2 A Metaphysical Revival**

The crucial change, enabling serious metaphysics to rise from the ashes of positivism, is usually traced to the debate between Quine and Carnap in the mid-twentieth century. In “On Carnap’s Views on Ontology” (1951/1966), Quine denies that Carnap’s division between internal and external existence questions has any significance.

Quine argues that Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions relies on a deeper distinction in the relationship between what we are inquiring to the existence of, and what we are quantifying over when asking the existence question. The existential quantifier, usually represented as ‘∃’, is read ‘there is’, and is said to ‘bind’ variables (typically ‘x’, ‘y’…) in its scope, which range over some domain of objects (they are those objects we are ‘quantifying over’). So existence questions may be posed using first-order logic as questions about whether or not “∃x(…x…)”, i.e. as questions about whether or not there is something that meets the following conditions (…x…). An existentially quantified claim of that form is true provided there is something in the domain of objects over which we are quantifying that, if substituted for the variable ‘x’, would make the claim true.

When we ask an existence question of the form “Are there so-and-so’s?”, in some cases, the so-and-so’s we are asking about (say, prime numbers between 16 and 20, or animals that are ivory-billed woodpeckers) would be just some among many of the things that we might be quantifying over (say, all the numbers or all the animals). So in asking existence questions like these, we are effectively asking: “Of all the xs (where ‘x’ ranges over numbers), are any primes between 16 and 20?”, or “Of all the ***x***s (where ‘***x***’ ranges over animals), are there any that are ivory-billed woodpeckers?” These Quine calls ‘subclass’ questions, since they are asking if there is anything of a particular *subclass* of the entities over which we are quantifying. Carnap’s ‘internal’ questions, Quine argues, are just subclass questions.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In other cases, in asking ‘Are there so-and-sos?’, we are asking about whether there is anything at all of the whole *category* of object our quantifier ranges over: are there any numbers (at all), or any animals (at all) (not just: are there any numbers/animals *that have certain features* of interest). In these cases, as Quine puts it, the so-and-sos “purport to exhaust the range of a particular style of bound variables” (1951/1966, 207). That is, if our ‘xs’ were supposed to range over all and only numbers, then the numbers (if any) would exhaust the range of this style of variable (and we might use a different style of variable, say, the ‘***x***s’to range over material objects). Quine calls these ‘category’ questions, and equates them with Carnap’s *external* questions when asked ‘before the adoption of a given language’ (1951/1966, 207).

But having recast the distinction in this way, Quine goes on to argue that we can always choose to adopt a single style of variable for all sorts of thing, e.g. let ‘the xs’ range over numbers *and* material objects. If we do that, then any existence question can be rephrased as a subclassquestion. So, for example, we could understand ‘Are there numbers?’ as a subclass question: “Of all the *objects*, are there any of them that are *numbers*?” As a result, Quine argues, the distinction between category questions and subclass questions can’t have any particular significance, since it varies given ‘logically irrelevant changes of typography’ (1951/1966, 210).

Nonetheless, as Quine acknowledges, Carnap’s approach to ontology can be preserved without relying on the internal/external distinction. For as long as he has the analytic/synthetic distinction, Carnap can hold that statements like ‘there are physical objects’ , ‘there are propositions’ or ‘there are numbers’ are analytic given rules for introducing the terms into the language (1951/1966, 209-210).[[8]](#endnote-8) Given the analytic/synthetic distinction, Carnap can also retain the idea that many statements thought of as ontological are disguised linguistic proposals, distinct from empirical existence claims like ‘there are black swans’ (1951/1966, 210).

So the real basis of the dispute between Carnap and Quine comes down to the analytic/synthetic distinction: “if there is no proper distinction between analytic and synthetic, then no basis at all remains for the contrast which Carnap urges between ontological statements and empirical statements of existence. Ontological questions then end up on a par with questions of natural science” (1951/1966, 211).

This of course is exactly the point that Quine aims to argue for. He famously argues in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1953/2001) that the analytic/synthetic distinction is ill-grounded. If we give up the analytic/synthetic distinction, we can no longer distinguish internal questions as those to be answered by empirical or analytic means, while external questions are best understood as pragmatic questions about what language to adopt. On Quine’s view, no existence claim is purely empirical, nor is any language choice purely pragmatic. Choosing a language is empirically loaded, so it is wrong to think of alternate linguistic frameworks as equally acceptable systems of rules, with the choice between them merely pragmatic. Instead, there are better and worse theories/languages—the best one is that which best enables us to predict and explain events (Hylton 2004, 134). Once we have chosen a best language-cum-theory, we can determine what exists according to (and so internally to) that theory/language, and have reason to accept those entities and to reject the posits of the lesser theories.

Quine was widely held to have won this debate, and to have inaugurated a new golden age for metaphysics. Indeed Quine was not only seen as rescuing metaphysics, but also as granting it new respectability on grounds that its questions could be considered as not obscure matters for scholastic dispute, but rather as ‘on a par with questions of natural science’. Scott Soames sums up the change in methodology inaugurated by Quine as follows: “For Quine, philosophy is continuous with science. It has no special subject matter of its own, and it is not concerned with the meanings of words in any special sense” (Soames 2003, 224). It would be no exaggeration to say that most of those who currently practice serious metaphysics either explicitly embrace Quine’s methodology or implicitly follow it. The new metaphysics, saved from the rubble of positivism, from a methodological standpoint, is by and large a neo-Quinean metaphysics.

**2. The New Metaphysics**

Since the 1950s, serious metaphysics has been alive and well again—indeed, it has been quite a growth area in philosophy, especially in the last three decades. In this section I will try to discuss the revival of metaphysics and the major approaches that have been taken to the three core questions, and will return to discuss challenges for the new metaphysics in section 3 below.

**2.1 Ontological Issues**

Quine explicitly laid out a methodology for the ontological part of metaphysics in “On What there Is” (in 1953/2001). The question “What is there?” or “What exists?” may be divided into two parts: first, how do we know what the ontological commitments of a theory are—what a theory is committed to *saying* there is? Second: what theory should we accept? If we can answer both of these questions, we can figure out both what theory to accept and what it commits us to, and thereby know to what ontology we should commit ourselves.

To answer the first question—the question of what a theory is ontologically committed to—Quine gives this short, famous answer: “a theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true” (1953/2001, 13-14). Let me explain.

Suppose you have a theory expressed in certain statements, and you want to know what you will be committed to saying exists, if you accept the theory. According to Quine, you can’t just look at what the statements of the theory, as expressed in ordinary English, say, or what names the theory uses in its statements, to determine what its commitments are. For suppose one statement of the theory is “Vulcan [the planet once hypothesized to orbit between Mercury and the sun] doesn’t exist”. It might on the surface seem that, in accepting the theory, you are committed to there being a planet between Mercury and the sun (to which we are referring with the name ‘Vulcan’), and asserting that has the property of not existing. (It seemed so to Meinong, at any rate.) But, Quine argues, even if we accept the theory we are not really committed to the existence of Vulcan.

Instead of just looking at the surface claims of a theory, Quine argues, to find out what you are committed to in accepting the theory we must properly express the theory’s claims in the more perspicuous notation of first-order quantified logic. Then we can see that the claim “Vulcan doesn’t exist” would be properly expressed in the quantificational form: “~∃x(Vx)” (it is not the case that there is something that is-Vulcan—i.e. that is a planet orbiting between Mercury and the sun[[9]](#endnote-9)). According to Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment, the theory is committed only to whatever entities these bound variables have to range over for the theory’s claims to be true. Once the theory’s claim is expressed in that clearer way, we can see that accepting the truth of this statement as part of our theory does not commit us ontologically to the existence of Vulcan (1953/2001, 7-8). For the statement to be true, the xs in the range of the quantifier need not include anything that is a planet orbiting between Mercury and the sun; it is enough merely that none of the xs over which the quantifier *does* range (me, my coffee cup, this parrot…) is something that is a planet orbiting between Mercury and the sun. So one can accept, as part of one’s astronomical theory, that Vulcan doesn’t exist, without being ontologically committed to Vulcan.

On the other hand, if a theory states “there are black holes”, we restate this in quantified form as: “∃x (BHx)” (i.e. There is something that is a black hole). Once the theory has been expressed in quantificational form, we can determine what entities the bound variables of the theory must range over for the theory to be true. In this case, for the theory to be true, there does have to be something in the domain of the quantifier that is a black hole. So anyone who accepts this as part of a theory *is* ontologically committed to black holes.

But another facet of Quine’s approach to ontological commitment needs to be brought out here: when we translate the statements of the theory into first-order quantified logic we are not constrained to using the most obvious or straightforward translation. Instead, we may aim to *paraphrase* the statements of the theory in a way that will minimize our ontological commitments. So, for example, suppose our theory says, “Venus has the property of being a planet”. One obvious way of expressing this in first-order quantified logic is: ∃x∃P ((Vx) & (x has P)), where ‘V’ stands for ‘is-Venus’ and ‘P’ stands for ‘the property of being a planet’). If we did express the theory this way, then we would be ontologically committed both to the existence of an individual (Venus) and to that of a property (the property of being a planet), since our quantifiers must range both over individuals (one of which must be Venus for the statement to be true) and the other of which must be a property (the property of being a planet). But on Quine’s view we need not be so committed in virtue of accepting that statement as part of one’s theory. For the statement may be paraphrased as “Venus is a planet”, which may be expressed in first order logic as “∃x (Vx & Px)” (“there is something that is-Venus and is a planet). In this rendering, we are quantifying only over individuals: For the statement to be true, something must lie in the range of the quantifier that is Venus and is a planet, but we are not quantifying over properties. Thus on Quine’s view, someone who accepts the original theory may avail herself of a paraphrase like this, and so need not be committed to the existence of properties (but only individuals). On the other hand, if our theory says “some zoological species are cross-fertile” we are committed to the existence of species “at least until we devise some way of so paraphrasing the statement as to show that the seeming reference to species on the part of our bound variable was an avoidable manner of speaking” (1953/2001, 13).

As a result, arguments about ontology since Quine have often centered on arguments about whether a given form of talk, apparently about numbers, fictional characters, properties, or other disputed entities, may be paraphrased into a form that does not require quantification over those suspect objects, thus enabling us to avoid ontological commitment to them (I return to this issue in the discussion of relational questions below).

On its own Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment does not tell us *what* there is, only how to find out what a given theory *says* there is—or, more properly, is *committed* to the existence of (1953/2001,15). To provide anything like a method for doing ontology, we must answer the second question: how should we decide which theories to accept? Here, Quine’s scientism does the work:

“Our acceptance of an ontology is… similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged. Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense” (1953/2001, 16-17)

We may choose among theories by employing such familiar criteria as explanatory power, explanatory simplicity, ontological parsimony, and so on. Assuming that our scientific theories turn out to be the best theories, that will mean that we accept all and only those entities that our best scientific theories tell us there is (i.e. what they require there to be to render their affirmations true).

This methodology for doing ontology has been extremely influential; it plays a key role, e.g. in Putnam’s and Quine’s own arguments for—and subsequently Hartry Field’s argument against—the existence of numbers, and in Peter van Inwagen’s argument for the existence of fictional characters (1983, 67-68), to name some prominent examples. Important questions arise, however, about how broadly one should interpret ‘theories’ here. Quine and Field are both directly concerned with whether our best *physical* theories can be formulated without quantifying over numbers. Van Inwagen, however, employs the notion of ‘theory’ far more broadly, applying the Quinean strategy by arguing that our best *literary-critical* theories about fiction include commitment to fictional characters.

While all neo-Quineans pay homage to Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment, an important distinction among neo-Quineans lies in whether they take Quine’s methodology to require ontologists to *defer to* scientists or to *act like* scientists. That is, if we take Quine to be requiring that we accept the best total theory—on the scientist’s own terms—and then use our philosophical/logical skills merely to render it into the standard form of quantified logic and determine its commitments, then we have a view of ontology as merely a ‘formal finishing school’ for science, in which ontologists merely await and interpret the results of the sciences—leading generally to rather sparse naturalist and physicalist ontologies.[[10]](#endnote-10) Others, however, have interpreted the Quinean methodology as leaving a far bigger role for the metaphysician, insisting that there is no difference in kind between philosophy and science, as both (perhaps together) are in search of the best ‘total theory’. Along those lines, a standard approach in metaphysical arguments has been to argue that accepting one’s favored entities provides the best ‘total theory’—evaluated according to the scientific theoretic virtues, even if that ‘total’ theory involves terms and posits no physicist ever dreamt of. One prominent example of this is David Lewis’ argument for an ontology of a multitude of possible worlds, on grounds of its contributions to theoretical economy, unity, and fruitfulness (1986, 4).

Putting these differences aside, the resurgence of metaphysics—more particularly, of the ontological branch of metaphysics—over the past sixty years may largely be credited to the influence of Quine, and the methodology that has dominated has been a Quinean quasi-scientific methodology.[[11]](#endnote-11) As Ted Sider puts it, the methodology of most metaphysicians today:

…is rather quasi-scientific. They treat competing positions as tentative hypotheses about the world, and assess them with a loose battery of criteria for theory choice…. Theoretical insight, considerations of simplicity, integration with other domains (for instance science, logic, and philosophy of language), and so on, play important roles. (2009, 385).

Indeed this quasi-scientific approach to metaphysics has become so dominant among its most prominent practitioners that David Manley calls it simply “mainstream metaphysics” (2009, 3).[[12]](#endnote-12)

A prominent alternative to Quine’s approach to ontology—that we should accept ontological commitment to whatever entities must serve as the values of the bound variables in our best theories—involves using the ‘Eleatic’ criterion, promoted by David Armstrong: “Everything that exists makes a difference to the causal powers of something” (1997, 41). On this view, as it is usually interpreted, we should accept into our ontology all and only those entities that *make a causal difference,* or that have ‘distinct causal powers’ ‘over and above’ those of other entities we accept.[[13]](#endnote-13) It is by wielding this principle (or rather, a version of it constrained to macrophysical objects), for example, that Trenton Merricks (2001, Chapter 3) argues against the existence of ordinary objects such as tables and chairs, by arguing that they lack distinctive causal powers ‘over and above’ those of the atoms that make them up.[[14]](#endnote-14) It has also (sometimes under the name “Alexander’s Dictum”: to be real is to have causal powers) played a prominent role in discussions about whether we should grant real existence to phenomenal consciousness (Kim 1993, 348-9).[[15]](#endnote-15) Another alternative to Quine’s approach is the truthmaker approach to ontological commitment (Heil 2003, Armstrong 2004, Cameron 2010)—I will return to discuss this under ‘relational issues’ below.

**2.2 Relational Issues**

Relational questions have also played a central role in the revival of metaphysics. As Kit Fine puts it “The history of analytic philosophy is littered with attempts to explain the special way in which one might attempt to ‘reduce’ the reality of one thing to another” (forthcoming, 6). The interest in relational questions has often been in service of the project of ontology. Initially, the goal was typically reduction of ‘higher level’ entities to ‘lower level’, where this was typically conceived of as requiring a translatability of talk of higher level entities into talk of the more basic entities. If we could paraphrase all talk of ‘higher level’ entities into talk about lower level entities, so that we can say all that needs to be said without quantifying over the higher-level entities, the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment would entail that we need not be committed to the higher-level entities at all, leaving us with a more parsimonious ontology and thus (other things remaining equal) a better theory.

As such analytic reductions proved elusive, the standards shifted: the new goal was to account for higher-level entities as ‘supervening’ on lower entities, where again the hope (though much more controversial) was that the supervening entities would be a kind of ‘ontological free lunch’ (to use a phrase of David Armstrong’s (1997, 12-13)). While there are many competing definitions of ‘supervenience’, the core idea is that A-type properties supervene on B-type properties if no two possible worlds differ in their A-type properties without differing in their B-type properties; e.g. moral properties are said to supervene on non-moral properties if no possible worlds could differ in their moral properties (differ in who did something morally praiseworthy or reprehensible, say) unless they also differed in their non-moral properties (i.e. differ in who performed which actions, with which results, etc.). But problems with the notion of supervenience emerged. For starters, this kind of co-variation doesn’t even ensure asymmetry or the dependence of A-type facts on B-type facts. More generally, to say that A properties supervene on B properties seems to report a superficial observation of correlations: the deeper metaphysical question is thought to be: *in virtue of what* does this supervenience relation hold? (Horgan 1993; Heil 2003, 37).

Thus (following a suggestion by C. B. Martin) the dominant terms of discussion for the relational question shifted again: to the project of finding the lower-level *truthmakers* for higher-level facts. As Armstrong puts it, a truthmaker is a part of reality in virtue of which a particular proposition is true (2004, 5). Thus, for example, one need not hold that statues are reducible to bits of clay (in the sense that all talk of the former may be translated into talk of the latter) to hold that *there being clay arranged in this way, by an artist, in these circumstances* is that in virtue of which ‘there is a statue’ is true (cf. Heil 2003, 48). According to those who defend a truthmaker definition of ontological commitment (Heil 2003, Armstrong 2004, Cameron 2010), showing that sentences involving terms for higher-level entities have as their truthmakers only lower level entities can ensure that we are *really* only committed to the existence of the more fundamental entities. As Ross Cameron puts it “the ontological commitments of a sentence are not what the sentence quantifies over but rather what entities must be included in our ontology to ground the truth of the sentence—what entities must exist to make the sentence true” (2010, 252).[[16]](#endnote-16)

**2.3 Modal Issues**

One might say that what Quine did for existence questions, Kripke did for modal questions. Those in the logical positivist tradition had identified necessary truths with analytic statements knowable *a priori* by those who mastered the use of the relevant terms or concepts. As a result, they considered modal questions—about the essences of things of various types, the identity or persistence conditions of entities of various types, and so on—to be answerable in principle by a form of conceptual or linguistic analysis.[[17]](#endnote-17)

But in *Naming and Necessity,* Kripke rejected the equation between necessary and *a priori* knowable truths, arguing that there are necessary *a posteriori* truths, and ‘probably contingent *a priori* truths’ (1972/1980, 38). So, for example, consider the truth of an identity statement, e.g. that Hesperus is Phosphorus. An identity statement, Kripke argued, must be *necessarily* true if it is true at all. But we can only learn that Hesperus is Phosphorus by doing empirical work in astronomy—it is not analytic, nor is it something we can learn just by linguistic competence with use of the names. Thus it provides an example of a necessary truth that is only knowable *a posteriori.* The same principle, Kripke argued, applies to theoretic identifications—such as that water is H2O. This, if true at all, is necessarily true, yet it is only discoverable *a posteriori* by scientific means, not by any form of conceptual analysis. One may be as competent a user of the term ‘water’ as one likes, and yet still not know the necessary truth that water is H2O. Kripke also argued that there are other necessary *a posteriori* truths, including statements of origin (e.g. that Margaret Truman is the daughter of Bess Truman), and of original composition (e.g. that this podium was made out of wood).

Kripke’s work reinvigorated the idea that there are genuine modal features of the world, ripe for discovery, that could not simply be known *a priori* by those competent in wielding the relevant concepts. As Crawford Elder puts it “we must learn from nature where there are real necessities... These matters are not ours to fashion; they are fixed independently of us” (2004, xi). This inspired many serious metaphysicians to take up modal questions, the answers to which they took to be discoverable by serious metaphysical enquiry.[[18]](#endnote-18)

And since modal facts were taken to be discoverable features of reality (not things we could somehow read off of our concepts or linguistic rules), conflict with what we would normally say about when two people are identical, or when a work of art persists, etc., was typically rejected as counter-evidence to a philosophical theory. Thus one result of the new robustly realist conception of modality has been a proliferation of revisionary positions in metaphysics over the past three decades or so. For example, Greg Currie defends the view that paintings are not individual material objects but rather are abstract action-types that can survive the destruction of any canvas (1989, 7), and brushes off complaints that his view conflicts with what we would normally say about the identity and persistence conditions of paintings, saying “it is possible that we are mistaken about this” (1989, 87). Elder himself argues (2004, 149) that the real necessities we can discover in the world support the idea that there are members of *some* kinds of artifacts (there are members of what he calls ‘copied kinds’: kinds that have clusters of essential properties traceable to a common history of function), but should lead us to deny that there are general artifactual kinds such as tables and chairs, scarves and earrings.

1. **New Challenges for Serious Metaphysics**

So where do we stand now, and where can we expect debates to head next in each of these areas? This can be assessed most precisely if we consider separately the three dominant sorts of questions in metaphysics: ontological questions, relational questions, and modal questions.

**3.1 Ontological Questions**

Where ontology is concerned, new grounds have recently been raised for questioning the long dominant Quinean approach. Quine’s arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction—which play such a crucial role in his rejection of Carnap’s approach and defense of the idea that philosophy and science are part of a single continuous enterprise—no longer seem as compelling as they once did and have been subjected to much recent criticism.[[19]](#endnote-19) Moreover, the idea that metaphysics and other areas of philosophy can and should proceed by a form of conceptual analysis has been recently revived, for example, by the Miami Analysts (McGinn (forthcoming), Thomasson (2007)).

If we can retain the analytic/synthetic distinction, or at least the idea that the truth of some sentences may analytically entail that of others (in the sense that—given logical principles and the meanings of terms involved—the truth of the first sentence guarantees the truth of the others), then certain existence questions may turn out to be trivially answerable (either *tout court* or, given some empirical truths).Thus, for example, I have argued elsewhere (2007b) that the empirical fact that there are, say, particles arranged chairwise analytically entails that there is a chair. If that is the case, then the question of the existence of chairs and other ordinary objects not a quasi-scientific question to be resolved by seeking the best ‘total theory’, but rather a question that’s trivially answerable by those who accept basic empirical truths such as: that there are particles arranged chairwise here—empirical truths that even eliminativists about ordinary objects accept. Stephen Schiffer (2003) and neo-Fregeans such as Crispin Wright (1983) and Bob Hale (2001) have argued that trivial something-from-nothing transformations entail the existence of propositions, properties, numbers and other disputed entities—transformations we can perform just by being competently introduced to the practices of using the relevant terms, without even the need to rely on any empirical truths. So, for example, those competently introduced to our use of property terms know that they are entitled to move from “Fido is a dog” to “Fido has the property of doghood”, to infer “There is a property (doghood)”—and thus to infer the existence of properties.[[20]](#endnote-20) Similarly, from “the cups and saucers are equinumerous” we are entitled to infer “the number of cups equals the number of saucers”, from which we can infer “There is a number”, giving us an ‘easy’ argument for the existence of numbers (Wright 1983).

These ‘lightweight’ or ‘easy’ approaches to ontology have received increasing discussion in recent years. Whether such ‘easy’ arguments are acceptable in ontology hinges at least in part on the question of whether we can defend the idea that there are analytic or trivial entailments that can be used in leading to existential conclusions (for critical discussion see Hofweber (2005, 2007) and Yablo (2002, 2005)). If there are, then it seems we have reason to drop the ‘only if’ side of Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment: that “We are convicted of a particular ontological presupposition if, *and only if,* the alleged presuppositum has to be reckoned among the entities over which our variables range in order to render one of our affirmations true” (1953/2001, 13). For if there are trivial entailments committing us to the existence of entities not mentioned in the basic statements of the theory, then we may be entitled, indeed required, to accept the existence of far more entities than those explicitly quantified over in the basic statements of our best scientific theories (see also Thomasson 2007, chapter 9; Jackson 1998, 4-5).

Others have attempted to revive the idea that our terms have some sort of conceptual content which can license some form of conceptual analysis, without appealing directly to analyticity (see, e.g. the two-dimensional semantics developed in Jackson 1998 and Chalmers 2002). The viability of conceptual analysis as a method for doing metaphysics has thus recently come back into discussion, and often relies on views in the philosophy of language: about the defensibility of a notion of analyticity, analytic or trivial entailments (and whether they may have existential consequences), or, more broadly, about whether our terms (or ways of referring to objects) have conceptual or intensional content.

Another worry about Quineanism and the heavy-duty metaphysics it inspired concerns whether the existence questions neo-Quineans dispute so seriously are genuine or merely verbal disputes. For the neo-Quinean, existence questions are to be formulated in quantificational terms, e.g. of whether there is something which is (…a property, a mereological sum, a table… and so on for other disputed entities). But, following some ideas of Putnam’s, Eli Hirsch (2002) has argued that the quantifier does not have a single, privileged meaning. If we allow that the meaning of the quantifier may vary, that raises the worry that existence disputes, e.g. between those who accept and deny the existence of mereological sums, may be merely *verbal* disputes in which the disputants mean different things by their quantified expressions and so fail to express any real disagreement at all. As Hirsch puts it:

If whenever you make an existential claim in metaphysics you are tacitly or unconsciously assuming that the claim has to be couched in terms of a quantificational apparatus that is in some sense the uniquely right one—the one that God would use—then this assumption is likely to lead you to futile and interminable pseudo-theoretical arguments. (2002, 61)

Hirsch doesn’t think that the use of the quantifier actually varies in ordinary English. But if we stick with the English use of the quantifier, he argues, the resolution to various ontological disputes (e.g. is there an object that is the mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel tower) becomes laughably trivial: since in *plain English*, the use of the quantifier precludes applying it to disjoint mereological sums, the answer is: no (2002, 60). However, if those who think there is a more serious dispute here rely on using different senses of the quantifier (from the ordinary English sense, and from each other), then their dispute threatens to be a mere verbal dispute.

Against the threat of quantifier variance, Ted Sider (2009) argues that disputes in ontology can’t readily be understood as classic verbal disputes, since there is no ‘neutral’ formulation of the debate that both parties to the dispute would accept (which would show it to be only a verbal disagreement). In defense of serious ontology, Sider appeals to David Lewis’ idea of ‘reference magnets’ to argue that there is a single best meaning for the quantifier. On Sider’s view, the world not only has a structure into natural kinds (that can serve as reference magnets for our natural kind terms); “the world’s distinguished structure includes quantificational structure” (2009, 407). Thus despite the differences in where those who affirm and deny mereological sums would apply the word ‘exists’, they may both be held to use ‘exists’ in the same sense: a technical sense in ‘Ontologese’, in which both agree to use the term in its most ‘natural’ sense: **existence,** understood as “being a property P such that something has P” (2009, 407).

Thus a current focus of debate concerns whether the quantifier does, or could vary, or if it has a single ‘best’ or ‘most natural’ meaning. Those who do think the quantifier has a ‘best’ meaning face the further question: can this be understood as the ordinary meaning of the English phrase ‘there are’, or does making sense of ontological disputes require shifting to a technical language such as Ontologese? (For further discussion in favor of introducing a technical language of Ontologese, see Hawthorne and Cortens (1995), Cameron (forthcoming); for critical discussion see Korman (forthcoming)). If, to do ontology, we must use a technical sense of the quantifier different from the standard English sense of ‘there is’, then further questions arise: what is that sense? How can we grasp it? And if they are using a technical sense of the quantifier, can ontological theories really speak to the question, raised in ordinary English, of whether or not *there are* tables and chairs and other disputed objects?

In response to these questions, Sider in his new book (forthcoming) argues that metaphysical debates are genuine, substantive debates to the extent that their crucial terms carve nature at the joints. Since the world has ‘logical joints’, in conducting ontological debates, the disputants may stipulate that their quantifiers are to carve the world at its joints, and thereby ensure that their debates about existence have depth—even if debates about existence, conducted in ordinary English, would not. While the answers we get by asking existence questions in Ontologese may be different answers (indeed answers to different questions) than those we would get if we stuck to ordinary English, the questions asked in Ontologese are said to be ‘better’ questions, as they are asked in a ‘better’ (joint-carving) language, giving us reason to care about those answers rather than the answers to trivial existence questions that can be posed in ordinary English (forthcoming, currently 172-3; section 8.8).

A different sort of threat to the Quinean approach to ‘mainstream metaphysics’ comes not from the thought that the quantifier might vary in meaning, but rather from the idea that the core questions used to motivate many ontological disputes—questions like ‘how many objects are there?’, ‘can two objects be in the same place at the same time?’, or ‘under what conditions do some things compose a larger thing?’—rely on an overly generic sense of ‘object’. As has often been pointed out (e.g. Lowe 1989, 11-12, 24-25; Hirsch 1982, 38), in its core use in ordinary English, ‘object’ is not a sortal term that comes associated with its own conditions of application and criteria of identity. Instead it functions as a ‘dummy sortal’—a placeholder for any other sortal—playing a ‘covering’ role under which, from any claim of the form ‘there is an S’ (where ‘S’ is any genuine sortal term) one is licensed to infer that there is an object. But, according to some (Thomasson 2007b) existence and counting questions are only answerable when they are expressed using a sortal term.[[21]](#endnote-21) Thus on this view generic existence questions about how many ‘objects’ there are, or what ‘objects’ are here—if they are using ‘object’ in a sortal-neutral sense—are simply ill-formed and unanswerable questions.[[22]](#endnote-22) If, on the other hand, we replace them with existence questions involving genuine sortal terms, asking, e.g. ‘how many cups are there’ or ‘under what conditions do pieces of wood compose a table’, then they are straightforwardly, indeed often trivially answerable—leaving no room for the kind of ‘deep’ ontological debates characteristic of the new serious metaphysics (Thomasson 2007b, 110-125).

**3.2 Relational Questions**

In recent work both the terms of the relational question and the goals of work on it have changed. As mentioned above, for a time the most prominent form of the relational question was to ask what the truthmakers were for our claims about entities of a certain sort. But the metaphysician’s desire to focus on *objects* in the *world* rather than the *truth* of sentences or propositions has led to a further shift from focusing on the *truthmakers* for *sentences or propositions about* higher-level entities, to the search to find the *grounds* for these facts and entities themselves. As Kit Fine puts it “From the perspective of the theory of ground, truth-maker theory has an unduly restricted conception of what is grounded” (forthcoming, 8). For while truths may be grounded in their truthmakers (it is those *in virtue of* which they are true), it is not merely truths that are grounded, but also (more relevantly to the metaphysician) facts, objects, etc.: thus grounding is said to be the more general issue than truthmaking. Moreover, some have argued, we need a *metaphysical* conception of grounding to explain the connection between truths and truthmakers: why it is that truthmakers are able to make certain propositions true. As Paul Audi puts it “it is very natural to express the truthmaker principle as the idea that the truth of true propositions is *grounded* in what there is, or in what facts obtain” (manuscript, 10).[[23]](#endnote-23) Thus the formulation of the core ‘relational’ question seems to be shifting again, to focus on the notion of ‘grounding’, and attempting to determine what entities are basic, and how they ground the non-basic entities.

The shift to an interest in grounding has often come with a shift in the very goals of addressing the relational question. As mentioned above, initially, interest in relational questions arose largely because they were thought relevant to the ontological question: it was thought that if we could reduce all talk of higher-level entities to talk of lower-level (and so avoid quantifying over the former), or could show that higher-level entities supervened on lower, or could show that higher-level claims were made true by lower-level entities, then we wouldn’t be ontologically committed to the higher level entities. But those ontological ambitions have been rejected by some recent defenders of grounding. Jonathan Schaffer, for example, argues against the Quinean conception of ontological commitment, and argues that finding the grounds for one sort of entity in another does not undermine the claim that the first ‘really exists’. Audi (forthcoming, 1-2) similarly argues that grounded entities are no less real than those entities that ground them.

Rather than using the relational question as a means of (more sparsely) answering the ontological one, Schaffer argues that we should give up the ontological question. For, he argues, most of the existence questions that have concerned metaphysicians are trivially answerable in the positive, given the validity of ‘easy’ arguments for such things as numbers and properties (as discussed in section 3.1 above)—e.g. claims like “there are numbers” and “there are properties” may be trivially inferred from obvious truths like “there are prime numbers” and “there are properties that you and I share” (2009, 357). Instead of pursuing such ontological questions, he argues, we should focus on the old Aristotelian questions: what grounds what? (2009, 347). As Schaffer puts it “metaphysics as I understand it is about what grounds what. It is about the structure of the world. It is about what is fundamental, and what derives from it” (2009, 379). In short in its latest form, the relational question has been presented as a question to be pursued in its own right, not in the service of answering the ontological question: what (really) exists?

If a separate core problem for metaphysics is discerning what grounds what, we might well ask what the methods are supposed to be for addressing grounding questions: how can we discover what grounds what? About this, less has been said. Audi, for one, leaves this open, holding that we may sometimes discover grounding facts *a priori* (e.g. as we may discover that the fact that this is red is grounded in the fact that it’s scarlet), sometimes empirically (e.g. as we discover that this being copper grounds this being electrically conductive) (forthcoming). Fine holds that grounding facts are themselves to be explained in terms of the natures of the things grounded (forthcoming, 50), and so one might expect that grounding facts may be discovered via the same route as facts about natures or essences: leading us back to the questions of modal epistemology discussed above. As Fine writes: “investigation into ground is part of the investigation into nature; and if the essentialist locus of ground-theoretic connections lies in the fact to be grounded and not in the grounds, then it is by investigating the nature of the items involved in the facts to be grounded rather than in the grounds that we will discover what grounds what” (forthcoming, 51). At any rate, questions regarding not only what grounds what, but also what the grounding consists in, and how one may discover or discern grounding facts, seem to be part of an emerging set of relational research problems in metaphysics.

**3.3 Modal Questions**

As mentioned above, modal questions came once again to occupy a central role in metaphysics after Kripke’s arguments were taken onboard in the 1970s. But while modal questions have been vigorously pursued, the deeper question that concerned the empiricists and early analytic philosophers has once again come to forefront: By what methods can we acquire knowledge of these modal facts? While there has been consensus since Kripke that there are modal facts that are not merely analytic facts, and cannot be discovered through mere conceptual analysis, there has been no consensus about how exactly the relevant modal facts about essences, identity, or persistence conditions *are* to be discovered.

Many mainstream metaphysicians carry on attempting to answer modal questions without engaging in the epistemological question of how we can know modal facts. But the problem is a virulent one: taking the metaphysically serious attitude of thinking that there are distinctively modal features of the world that metaphysics is (in part) in the business of discovering makes it particularly perplexing how we could hope to acquire that knowledge. For the modal facts of the world (assuming there are some) don’t seem to be features to which we are in any way *causally* connected, making purported modal knowledge importantly disanalogous to perceptual knowledge. Moreover, on many of the dominant views of what modal facts consist in (whether one takes them to involve facts about other concrete possible worlds or about possible worlds considered as abstract entities such as sets of propositions or the like) make it doubly clear that we can expect to have no causal interaction with the modal facts we aim to describe.

In fact, the problem of the epistemology of modality may deserve the notoriety of being one of the problems we have made the *least* progress in resolving in the last half-century. Peter van Inwagen puts it succinctly: “Modal epistemology is a subject about which little is known” (2001, 251).

In the face of the epistemic problem, some have advocated a form of skepticism about many modal claims in metaphysics. For example, van Inwagen allows that we do have knowledge of mundane possibilities (e.g. about where we could put that vase), but denies that this ability to acquire everyday modal knowledge carries over to enable us to know the truth of the sorts of modal proposition disputed in many metaphysical debates (e.g. whether it is possible for there to be a perfect being, whether it is possible that I exist and nothing material exist) (2001, 243-245). Moreover, though he accepts that we have mundane modal knowledge, van Inwagen doesn’t offer any account of how we may acquire such knowledge, saying simply “I regard much of this knowledge as mysterious” (2001, 250).

Others have likewise declined to even try to answer this epistemic question. For example, while David Lewis suggests that we often *do* arrive at modal opinions by reasoning from a principle of recombination, he offers no justification for *why* that should give us any knowledge about what is true in other possible worlds. The deeper problem: of how we could acquire something that qualifies as *knowledge* of modal facts, he simply punts on, saying “That is a fair request, and I regret that I cannot deliver the goods. But I don’t see that this is especially my problem. It is a problem for everyone (certain skeptics and conventionalists excepted)…” (1986, 113). (Notice here what Lewis points out: that this is a problem that has particularly originated since the positivist’s conventionalist treatment of modal questions was rejected—it is a problem for the new serious metaphysics that didn’t arise (or at any rate was far less virulent, with a clear idea of the direction of reply) for the older, more modest sort of metaphysics that was regarded as acceptable even by the positivists.)

These epistemic worries, of course, haven’t prevented many metaphysicians from claiming to know modal truths, and using these centrally in their arguments. Many still appeal to claims about what is imaginable or, more broadly, conceivable, in arguments about when something, e.g., would or would not survive. As Stephen Yablo puts it “In the actual conduct of modal inquiry, our theoretical scruples about conceivability evidence are routinely ignored” (1993, 3). But if (as those practicing ‘serious’ or deep metaphysics presuppose) modality is supposed to be a deep feature of the world, it’s unclear why our imagination or conceptual abilities should provide knowledge of what is or is not possible (cf. Evnine 2008, 666). Given the role of imaginative experiments and conceivability claims in arguments about what is possible, necessary, or impossible, a large part of the discussion of the epistemology of modality has centered on whether or not what we can imagine or conceive provides any guide to what is or is not possible. Some have defended the idea that conceivability provides some, even if fallible, guide to possibility. Stephen Yablo, for example, defends the idea that if something is conceivable we have a *prima facie* (though defeasible) reason for regarding it as metaphysically possible, where something is conceivable only if one can imagine a world that one takes to verify it (1993, 34).

Others have defended the idea that there is not just an *evidential* but a *constitutive* connection between conceivability and possibility. David Chalmers, for example, argues that, provided we understand the notion of conceivability properly, conceivability doesn’t just provide evidence of possibility, it entails possibility (2002b). More precisely, he holds that the ability to positively conceive of P (on ideal rational reflection) entails that P is possible (that there is some possible world in which P is the case); and that being unable (on ideal rational reflection) to rule out P entails that P is possible (2002b, 171-2).

A more minority approach has been to look for knowledge of modal facts not from our ability to imagine or conceive of situations, but rather from empirical, factual knowledge. That means holding that (contrary to Hume) modal facts about essences or natures can be purely empirically discovered—just as other facts are. So, for example, Crawford Elder argues that essential properties of objects may be purely empirically discovered by the ways in which properties cluster together—using what he calls the “test of flanking uniformities” (2004, 23).[[24]](#endnote-24)

There has also been some renewed interest in deflationary approaches to modality as alternatives that might hope to crack the epistemic problem. For example, Alan Sidelle (1989) defends a neo-conventionalist approach to modality, and argues that a virtue of this view is that it enables us to explain why our modal intuitions may be thought to give us knowledge of modal facts (1989, 110-111). On his view, all *general* principles of individuation are analytic, and so knowable in virtue of our mastery of the relevant linguistic conventions. Our knowledge of Kripkean *a posteriori* necessary truths comes from combining our knowledge of general principles of individuation (e.g. that—if there is water—whatever chemical microstructure water actually has, it has necessarily) with empirical knowledge (e.g. that water actually has the chemical microstructure H2O). The modal force of the claim comes from the general principle of individuation, knowable *a priori* given our linguistic competence, but the full knowledge of the derivative modal claim (that water is necessarily composed of H2O) comes only with the addition of empirical knowledge, accounting for its a *posteriori* status (1989, 35-7, 43-4).

Others (e.g. Blackburn (1993), Brandom (2008) and Thomasson (2007c)) have argued for a different deflationary approach to modality, in the form of a non-descriptivist understanding of modal discourse. On Brandom’s view, for example, talk about what is necessary has the function not of describing modal facts, but rather of making explicit certain norms governing the use of non-modal, empirical terms and concepts (2008, 99). This line of thought enables one to demystify modal knowledge by showing how our abilities to utilize ordinary (non-modal—or at least not explicitly modal) vocabulary, combined with our ability to make explicit the rules governing those terms (in object language modal indicatives), enables us to make true basic modal claims, and to acquire what modal knowledge there is to acquire (cf. Thomasson 2007c, 149-150).

1. **Conclusion**

While I have found it clearest to proceed by examining each type of research problem separately, some commonalities clearly reach across all three of these areas. In each area, the turn to concern with methodological questions is becoming more prominent. After the heady post-Quinean revival of simply doing first-order metaphysics, questions are once more being raised about how we can acquire knowledge in metaphysics: whether about issues of ontology, of grounding, or of modality. Methodological questions and meta-metaphysical questions are once again coming to the forefront, in ways that they had not for the past sixty years or more, but that are reminiscent of debates that held center stage in the earlier twentieth century, as ‘analytic philosophy’ self-consciously emerged.

Where ontology is concerned, there *was* a methodological consensus that secured the revival and proliferation of ontology as a sub-discipline of metaphysics: the consensus was to adopt the Quinean approach to existence questions (putting aside difficulties about how exactly to interpret this). But this consensus is beginning to crack, as more and more philosophers are beginning to question the legitimacy of the scientistic approach, to question the arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction that lie behind Quine’s approach, and to question its foundations in an absolutist interpretation of the quantifier. Interest is once again turning back to Carnap’s side of the seminal Carnap-Quine debate, and a great many skeptical positions in contemporary meta-metaphysics may be identified as, in some sense, neo-Carnapian (see, e.g., Thomasson 2007, Chalmers 2009).

Where relational questions are concerned, there has been far less stability, as the very terms in which they are formulated have been constantly changing. In its current formulation, as considering questions of ground, little has been said about the proper methods for going about answering these questions, so here, too, much work remains to be done.

Finally, where modal questions are concerned, there previously *had been* a methodological consensus—that necessary truths were broadly speaking analytic truths and discoverable *a priori* by a form of conceptual analysis. That was rejected in light of Quine’s arguments against analyticity and Kripke’s discovery of necessary *a posteriori* truths. Yet there have been few plausible and informative suggestions of alternative methodologies for discovering modal truths, and that remains one of the most vexed problems in metaphysics. Without progress on that front, it is quite difficult to see how to evaluate the ongoing first-order debates about modal facts and properties in metaphysics.

In sum, research problems in metaphysics are increasingly methodological in focus. As the methodological worries have come to the forefront, there has also come to be a growing minority interested in deflationary alternatives to the robust neo-Quinean metaphysics that has held center stage for the past sixty years. So, for example, we see increasing interest in minimalist or ‘easy’ approaches to ontology (Schiffer 2003, Wright 1983, Thomasson 2007b); as well as a small but growing interest in deflationary conventionalist or non-descriptivist approaches to modality (Sidelle 1989, Blackburn 1993, Brandom 2008, Thomasson 2007c). This has led in turn to increasing methodological sophistication and retrenching by those on the side of ‘mainstream’ metaphysics (e.g. Sider 2009 and forthcoming, van Inwagen 2009). The debates on these issues are very much in full swing, and will no doubt continue for some time to come. How the methodological questions get answered in turn will make all the difference to which research problems are pursued and which dismissed as unanswerable or pseudo-problems, and to how they are pursued and how their competing answers are evaluated.[[25]](#endnote-25)

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Ayer, A. J. 1946/1952. *Language, Truth and Logic.* Dover: New York.

After visiting the Vienna Circle, Ayer wrote this book to promote the logical positivist ideas of the circle to a broader philosophical audience. It provides an accessible classic statement of the logical positivist view. In it, one can find criticisms of metaphysics (considered as anything other than analysis), a vision of the proper function of philosophy as engaged only in analysis, and an articulation of the conventionalist approach to modality, as well as much else.

Chalmers, David J., David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, eds. 2009. *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This collection has set the stage for the reemergence of metametaphysics as a core topic of debate. It includes an excellent introduction by David Manley surveying the origins of the debate and the different positions available, along with sixteen original essays. The essays are by many of the leading contributors to contemporary debates in metaphysics, and include defenders of serious metaphysics (such as Peter van Inwagen and Theodore Sider) as well as those of a more skeptical or deflationary bent (such as David Chalmers, Eli Hirsch, Huw Price and Stephen Yablo).

Evnine, Simon. 2008. “Modal Epistemology: Our Knowledge of Necessity and Possibility”. *Philosophy Compass* 3/4: 664-684.

An excellent survey of views about how we can acquire modal knowledge, including the conventionalist approach, and the idea (developed in very different ways by Yablo and Chalmers) that conceivability provides some kind of guide to possibility.

Gendler, Tamar and John Hawthorne, eds. 2002. *Conceivability and Possibility.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This anthology begins with a helpful and substantive introduction to issues surrounding the relation between conceivability and possibility. It includes 13 original essays on conceivability, possibility, and the relation between them, by George Bealer, Kit Fine, Alan Sidelle, Ernest Sosa, Crispin Wright, and others, including the seminal essays by David Chalmers and Stephen Yablo.

Kripke, Saul. 1972/1980. *Naming and Necessity.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Kripke’s landmark lectures arguing that there are necessary *a posteriori,* and (perhaps) contingent *a priori* truths. These lectures were thought to put the final nail in the coffin of the idea that necessary truths were analytic statements knowable *a priori ,* and to reinvigorate the idea that discoverable modal facts form part of reality.

Quine, Willard van Orman. 1953/2001. *From a Logical Point of View. Second Edition.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Includes reprints of nine of Quine’s papers. ‘On what there is’, lays out Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment, setting the stage for the Quinean approach to ontology. ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ includes influential arguments against the tenability of a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, and in favor of the view that ontological questions are “on a par with questions of natural science” (45).

Schiffer, Stephen. 2003. *The Things we Mean.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

One of the most important developments and defenses of a kind of deflationary metaphysical view. Schiffer argues that many disputed entities in metaphysics, including fictional characters, properties, events, and (the main case under discussion here) propositions are ‘pleonastic’ entities. A pleonastic entity, on Schiffer’s view, is one whose existence supervenes on the premises of ‘something from nothing’ transformations from true sentences we accept that contain no mention of such things. Thus on this view existence questions about such pleonastic entities may be trivially answered by any competent users of the relevant concepts; they are not ‘deep’ questions for metaphysical debate.

Sidelle, Alan. 1989. *Necessity, Essence and Individuation: A Defense of Conventionalism.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

This book provides the best-developed contemporary defense of a conventionalist view of modality. Sidelle shows how we can retain the idea that the most basic modal truths are analytic, while still accounting for the fact that some necessary truths (Kripkean *a posteriori* necessities) require empirical discovery. Thus, he argues, Kripke’s influential arguments in fact give us no reason to hold a deeply realist view of modality.

Sider, Theodore. *Writing the Book of the World.* (forthcoming)

This book develops the most important recent defense of metaphysics as engaged in deep and serious disputes (not mere verbal disputes or disputes that can be resolved trivially or via conceptual analysis). Sider argues that the world has structure, and that the job of metaphysics is to discern the fundamental structure of reality. Ontological debates, he argues, are substantive provided their crucial expressions ‘carve nature at the joints’. This provides the basis for him to argue that many metaphysical debates are substantive, as against various forms of ontological deflationism.

Soames, Scott. 2003. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century Volumes 1 and 2.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

An excellent and comprehensive history of analytic philosophy. It includes (*inter alia*) detailed discussions of the rise and fall of logical positivism, of Wittgensteinian and ordinary language approaches to philosophy, and of Quine’s and Kripke’s key contributions.

1. I will speak of these as ‘existence questions’, but of course allied questions are raised about what entities there *are.* Formulating the questions in those terms enables us to at least make superficial sense of the metaphysical question: are there nonexistent objects? Nonetheless, as most contemporary metaphysicians treat ‘there exist’ and ‘there are’ as equivalent, and as ‘existence questions’ is a better phrase then ‘what there is questions’, I will continue to speak of ‘existence questions’ above—meaning to include also questions about what there *is,* where this is taken to be a broader question than one formulated in terms of what ‘exists’. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Along with these first-order modal questions come also metaphysical questions about modality itself: are there essences? are there modal properties? are there other possible worlds? These I would classify as existence questions *about* (alleged) modal entities rather than as first-order modal questions. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. These issues of dependence also tend to play a core role in relational questions about what grounds what. I don’t mean to suggest that these types of question are mutually exclusive. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Despite these acceptable forms, Ayer and other positivists tended to use the term ‘metaphysics’ as a term of abuse. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As I have argued elsewhere (2002), phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger employed a very similar methodology to that of ‘analytic’ conceptual analysts, indeed one that seems to have been influential on the development of ordinary language philosophy. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This is not to suggest that Williamson himself thinks that, in a philosophical sense, it shouldn’t be happening. He continues: “Many of those who practice it happily acknowledge its continuity with traditional metaphysics; appeals to the authority of Kant, or Wittgenstein, or history, ring hollow, for they are unbacked by any argument that has withstood the test of recent time” (2007, 19). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Subclass questions also include category questions “when these are construed as treated within an adopted language as questions having trivially analytic or contradictory answers” (Quine 1951/1966, 207). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Carnap’s approach in this regard is closely related to the later ‘easy’ or ‘lightweight’ arguments for the existence of numbers, propositions, etc. defended by Hale, Wright, Schiffer and others. See section 3.1 below for discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For simplicity, I will here treat ‘Vulcan’ as a shorthand for the description: the planet orbiting between Mercury and the sun. This is of course a contested issue itself, but is not at stake here, and the assumption will greatly simplify the exposition. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The phrase is from Huw Price (2006), who argues that even this may prove too ambitious a conception of metaphysics to properly attribute to Quine himself. For it is clear that on Quine’s view philosophy is *continuous* with science, and there is no standpoint outside of science for the philosopher to take to separately ask, given those theories, how things really stand. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This is not to say that Quine himself would have endorsed the contemporary conception of metaphysics, or the work done under its name—indeed there have been powerful arguments suggesting that the neo-Quinean metaphysicians have often misinterpreted what Quine was really saying, or what the debate between Carnap and Quine was really about. See Price (2009) and Soames (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For a further articulation and defense of this neo-Quinean metaontology, see van Inwagen (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Graham Oddy (1982) discusses the difficulties in interpreting Armstrong’s criterion. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For critical discussion of this argument see my (2007b), Chapter 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Notice that Quine’s criterion and the Eleatic criterion may lead to different results: e.g. If numbers are indispensible to our best physical theories, then by the Quinean criterion we should accept their existence even if they do not, themselves, make a causal difference; by the Eleatic criterion we should not. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For critical discussion of this approach, see Schaffer (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Of course, Quine’s criticisms of the notion of analyticity already cast doubt on this understanding of necessary truths—though Quine himself aimed to reject modal notions along with analyticity, not to revive a deeper metaphysical conception of modality. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I say many serious metaphysicians ‘took them to be’ discoverable by metaphysical enquiry. Whether they were right to draw this lesson from Kripke’s work is another matter—it is arguable that the proper lesson to draw instead is that some essences require empirical work to be discovered. But, as Sidelle has argued (1989), this is perfectly compatible with a general Empiricist approach that sees the work of metaphysics as lying only in conceptual analysis, and the work of science as undertaking empirical inquiry (see below), with no role remaining for ‘serious’ metaphysics. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The earliest of which is Strawson and Grice (1956); but there has been a recent resurgence: see, e.g. McGinn (forthcoming), Thomasson (2007, Chapter 2), Creath (2000), Russell (2008, 129-137). For a contemporary defense of the analytic/synthetic distinction see Russell (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Notice that this doesn’t in fact rely on an empirical truth at all, since the same conclusion can be reached even if the original claim is false. From “Fido *isn’t* a dog” we can similarly infer “Fido lacks the property of doghood” and then infer: “There is a property (lacked by Fido) (doghood).” [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. More precisely, answerable existence questions must be posed using a term with associated application conditions (which fix basic existence conditions for the entities, if any, falling under the term); answerable counting questions require that the term also be associated with co-application conditions (which fix basic identity conditions for the objects, if any, falling under it). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Unless they are using ‘object’ in a covering sense in which it is clear which sortal terms are covered; in that case the question is straightforwardly answerable by answering the sub-questions for each covered sortal term. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For further discussion of the relation between grounding and truthmaking, see Fine (forthcoming) and Audi (manuscript). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. For a discussion of problems with this approach, see my (2007a). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Many thanks to Simon Evnine, Dan Korman, and Uriah Kriegel for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)