Metaphysics at the End of the Century

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As we near the end of a century, perhaps more than at any other moment in its long history, metaphysics as it has been understood in the West, has come under consistent, unrelenting attack. The persistent concern with metaphysics is very old, and depending on the definition given it, it is as old as philosophy itself, even its main theme. Much, therefore, is at stake in determining the continued viability of metaphysics, such as the viability of a central philosophical theme or even the very viability of philosophy itself as a meaningful enterprise. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to say a few words about the prospects for metaphysics as we begin the new millenium.

Types of Western Metaphysics

Part of the difficulty in discussing anything as broad as “metaphysics,” which has been extensively discussed over centuries, consists in getting clear about what is meant by it. Like many other key philosophical terms, this word, which has been employed in many ways by many writers over a very long period now approaching several thousand years, has no fixed, or non-normative meaning. Depending on how it is understood, this distinctive theme was already present in various types of non-Western thought before it arose in Western thought, for instance, in Chinese philosophy, which is very old, and in Indian philosophy, which is considerably older.

Since metaphysics is not a specifically Western theme, it would be a serious error either to denigrate non-Western metaphysics as unworthy of respect or to assume that arguments about metaphysics in

1 See, for example, Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa, eds., A Companion to Metaphysics (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997).
2 For a good discussion of Indian philosophy, see S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2 vols.
general necessarily apply, or apply at all, to types of metaphysics with which one may not be familiar. This paper will concern Western metaphysics only, not because I think it is somehow better than some other kind, but because of the contingent fact that I am simply not familiar enough with any of the various non-Western traditions to make generalizations about them. Its conclusions, hence, apply only to Western metaphysics.

It is well known that for Western philosophy, the term “metaphysics” was originally applied by a commentator to Aristotle’s treatise on being. If metaphysics relates to ontology, then even in the Western tradition it is older than Aristotle. In the writings of the pre-Socratics, ancient Greek cosmology concerned early pre-scientific speculation about the stuff of the universe. Roughly speaking, metaphysical concentration on being, which begins in pre-Socratic times, continues from ancient Greek philosophy until the modern period, which may or may not begin with Descartes, when it increasingly (but not entirely) gives way to epistemology. Although there are still many writers concerned with ontology, or ontological metaphysics, understood as, to use Putnam’s term, the furniture of the universe, there are probably still more concerned with epistemology which, following Kantian usage, counts as metaphysics.

Even in the modern period in which “metaphysics” has been closely associated with epistemology, the term has been used in a great many disparate ways which are difficult to reconcile in a single central idea. Modern metaphysics has undergone a sea change from the time of Descartes, when it was understood as the first part of the true philosophy which alone grounded knowledge in all its forms. In the second half of the eighteenth century, at the time of Hume and Kant, when Cartesian foundationalism had already been ostensibly abandoned, the concern with metaphysics centered on the post-Cartesian distinction, influential in the later debate, between good and bad metaphysics. According to Kant, bad incorrectly studies questions about the world, man

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(or human being) and God which, since they surpassed experience, cannot possibly be answered. In Kant's critical philosophy, "good metaphysics" is synonymous with an inquiry into the most general conditions of knowledge. Kant carefully distinguishes between epistemology, or the theory of any knowledge whatsoever, and a statement of its conditions — in his language, its prolegomena.\(^5\) His claim that prior to his critical philosophy all philosophy was dogmatic, and his further claim that there could at most be one true philosophy,\(^6\) imply that he has finally resolved the problems of metaphysics, which, like philosophy, in principle reaches an end in his thought.

The Kantian approach to metaphysics in terms of its general conditions is widely influential in the discussion, although later writers uniformly reject his implicit claim to complete metaphysics in his position. With the exception of post-Kantian scholastic thinkers, who continue to explore pre-Kantian lines of investigation, often with regard to the nature of the later debate, two main reactions in the later discussion can be distinguished with respect to the proposed refutation of bad metaphysics or the effort to make out a version of the claim that the time of metaphysics is over. The first, comparatively moderate, effort to continue the Kantian effort to refute bad metaphysics has two main adherents in American pragmatism and in the Vienna Circle movement. We shall return to their views below.

The second, more radical reaction consists in the assertion that philosophy is over or that metaphysics is over. Kant's view that metaphysics, hence philosophy, reaches an end in his thought suggests that metaphysics can be completed, hence that the time of metaphysics is over. The second conclusion has been drawn repeatedly starting with Hegel's death, although not by Hegel. This claim takes two general, related forms. One is the refusal of philosophy and the other is the refusal of metaphysics.

The view that philosophy is over so that further philosophy is not possible simply transposes Kant's claim that philosophy ends in his own position to Hegel's later position. The difference lies only in the

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particular view which is claimed to bring the metaphysical tradition to an end, but not in the claim that it has ended.

Post-Kantian German idealism consists in a series of attempts to carry the Copernican Revolution in philosophy, on which the critical philosophy depends, beyond Kant. The post-Kantian German idealist effort to complete Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy culminates in Hegel. After his death, the young Hegelians suggested that in Hegel philosophy reaches a high point and an end. 7 In the nineteenth century, widespread skepticism about the possibility of continuing philosophy after Hegel’s death was widely reflected in such supposedly extra-philosophical figures as Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche.

A related, Kantian claim that metaphysics has ended, although not in his critical philosophy, is advanced by Heidegger, who thinks that metaphysics ended with Nietzsche, 8 and Habermas, who believes that metaphysics ended with Kant. 9 These and other writers disagree about when or why metaphysics came to an end, although they do at least agree that metaphysics and as a result philosophy are no longer possible.

Recent attacks on metaphysics

So far, I have indicated that the main attitudes toward metaphysics after Kant are dictated by reactions to the critical philosophy. Discussion in our time has been characterized by three main attitudes toward metaphysics. Side by side with those who continue metaphysics understood in either of the two main traditional ways (or in some combination thereof) as ontology or epistemology, this century has seen the emergence of a steady attack on metaphysics. This attack has so far taken

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7 “Our philosophical revolution is concluded; Hegel has closed its great circle.” See Heinrich Heine, Religion and Philosophy in Germany, translated by John Snodgrass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 156.


9 Habermas’ view that metaphysics has already ended is in effect an analytic version of Heidegger’s view, supplemented through the claim that Bewußtseinsphilosophie is conceptually exhausted and cannot be recovered, and that in the turn to language the discussion has moved beyond metaphysics. See Jürgen Habermas, Nachmetaphysisches Denken: Philosophische Aufsätze (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1988).
two main forms. On the one hand, there is the focused effort, influenced by Hume and Knat, to refute bad metaphysics, hence a certain kind of philosophy in favor of other kinds of philosophy. This effort should be taken as merely another form of the familiar struggle for supremacy among competing philosophical tendencies, reflected in this case by the effort of certain thinkers to refute others as falling outside the limits of metaphysics or philosophy—it is often not clear which—as even charitably conceived. On the other, there is the more diffuse effort to refute metaphysics as such however conceived across the board in order to show that philosophy in all its many forms has come to an end.

The attack on bad metaphysics in this century has been of two main kinds. On the one hand, there is the effort in American pragmatism, particularly Peirce, to oppose pragmatism, understood as a new form of epistemology, to ontological metaphysics. According to Peirce, pragmatism, which is concerned with the future consequences of a theory, is meaningful, but ontological metaphysics, which has no such consequences, is meaningless.\(^\text{10}\) Peirce’s view emerges directly from his reading of Kant, whose position he knew well. If Peirce is right, after Kant, meaningful ontological claims simply cannot be made, but good metaphysics, which he understood as pragmatism, is eminently possible.

Peirce’s brand of pragmatism developed in independence of analytic philosophy, with which it has certain affinities. The analytic attack on metaphysics, which was already latent in Bertrand Russell’s work on denoting,\(^\text{11}\) emerged in the Vienna Circle effort to formulate a new scientific world view (\textit{wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung}), understood as scientific philosophy. In its most extreme form, scientific philosophy implies a conceptually seamless web between experience and science. This specific effort peaked in the work of Rudolf Carnap in the late 1920s. \textit{The Logical Structure of the World} (1928) provides a rational reconstruction of the main concepts of knowledge through concepts which immediately refer to the empirical given. The type of physicalism Carnap professed in this book, which was shared by many other


members of the Vienna Circle, with the important exception of Neurath,\textsuperscript{12} comes down to an ontological claim about reality as ultimately composed of physical entities.

This ontological claim suggests two epistemological points with deep roots not only in Wittgenstein but also in Kant’s famous assertion that knowledge necessarily begins in, but is not confined to, experience. First, if reality is composed of physical entities, then everything that is real, hence meaningful, can be known empirically, or on an empirical basis. Second, since what cannot be known empirically is obviously not real, cognitive references to it cannot be meaningful.

Carnap applied this latter idea in a nontechnical attempt to eliminate pseudoproblems, what Kant would call bad metaphysics, from epistemology, in an article published in the same year entitled, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language.”\textsuperscript{13} Following the early Wittgenstein’s view\textsuperscript{14} that metaphysical sentences are unverifiable, hence meaningless, he argues that statements either asserting or denying the reality of the external world are mere pseudo-statements. He specifically attacks Heidegger in arguing for the meaningfulness of all metaphysics. At this point, when Carnap understood “metaphysics” as consisting in claims about the essence of things which transcend empirical experience, he was very close to what Kant understood as bad metaphysics. Like Peirce, his version of the scientific world view is similar to the concern with good metaphysics which already motivated Hume and Kant.

The first attack on metaphysics, illustrated in different ways by Pierce and Carnap, aims to eliminate a kind of philosophy, that is, bad philosophy, but neither good philosophy nor philosophy as such. Although their views are very different, Peirce and Carnap agree that philosophy is viable if carried on in a scientific, that is, rigorous, manner. The sec-


ond, more radical attack on metaphysics identified, not as a form of
philosophy, but as philosophy itself, originated in the later Heidegger.
In *Being and Time* (1927), where he proposed a theory of fundamental
ontology, Heidegger tried to renew the so-called authentic problem of
ontology as it supposedly occurs in the early Greeks, particularly
Aristotle, perhaps also Plato or selected pre-Socratic thinkers. Accord-
ing to Heidegger, although metaphysics is widely discussed in the later
debate, the original form of the problem was later forgotten as philoso-
phy traversed different paths no longer leading toward but rather away
from this basic concern. Since Heidegger specifically insists on the need
to raise the problem which concerns him as it was originally authenti-
cally raised in ancient Greece, not in its putatively inauthentic later form,
its recovery requires him to return to the point behind the ensuing
philosophical tradition.

Heidegger's manifest failure to revive authentic metaphysics led him
after the mysterious turning in his thought in the early 1930s to reject
metaphysics and, for that reason, philosophy in favor of what he began
to call thought (*Denken*). According to this influential view, expressed
in piecemeal fashion in his later writings, the time of metaphysics is over,
and, since philosophy is metaphysics, philosophy is also no longer pos-
sible. For instance, in the lecture courses on Nietzsche, Heidegger ar-
gued very much in the spirit of the young Hegelians that Hegel's sys-
tem is the completion of metaphysics and Nietzsche's reversal of
Platonism is its end.\(^\text{15}\) And in the "Letter on Humanism," he maintained
that after philosophy there is only thought.\(^\text{16}\)

Since, for Heidegger, metaphysics is ontology, his claim concerns
ontological metaphysics. This claim has more recently been given an
epistemological twist by postmodernist writers influenced by him, such
as Derrida, Lyotard and Rorty. All three offer variations on an attack
on epistemological foundationalism. Speaking generally, Derrida's cri-
tique of presence can be described as a type of anti-semanics designed
to undercut the very idea of definite reference, initially by showing, in
an anti-foundationalist argument, that claims to know cannot be

\(^{15}\) See Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Ralph

\(^{16}\) "Letter on Humanism," in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, translated by D. F.
founded. In his account of postmodernity, Lyotard argues that there is no longer any overarching tale, hence no adequate legitimation of claims to know. In his attack on epistemology of all kinds, Richard Rorty in effect maintains that, since the analytic form of epistemological foundationalism fails, there is nothing interesting to say about the problem of knowledge.

Has Metaphysics Been Refuted?

It is clear that metaphysics in our time is under heavy attack; it is not clear that it has been refuted or even compromised. Peirce and Carnap reject metaphysics understood as empirically meaningful statements; Heidegger rejects metaphysics understood as (phenomenological) ontology; the postmodernist Heideggerians reject metaphysics understood as epistemological foundationalism. These recent attacks on metaphysics have been influential, although none of them is obviously correct. Let us consider their merits briefly.

It would be wrong to assimilate Peirce and Carnap, since their views are finally very different. Peirce, who began by criticizing Descartes, was an epistemological anti-foundationalist. The early Carnap was clearly an epistemological foundationalist in the Cartesian tradition. But they overlap in the shared concern to exclude what, in Carnapian language, can be described as meaningless statements. From somewhat different perspectives, Peirce and Carnap refute bad metaphysics, understood as epistemology, while continuing to do other kinds of metaphysics. Peirce insists that what he calls conceptions must have sensible effects to be meaningful. Carnap more arbitrarily rejects claims which fail to meet the empirical criterion of meaning.

Peirce's pragmatic view of meaningfulness is wider than Carnap's positivist view. The positivist attack on metaphysics as meaningless presupposes a form of verificationism. Despite widespread later criticism

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of empiricism from within analytic circles (e.g. Quine\textsuperscript{20} and Davidson\textsuperscript{21}), it is still maintained in sophisticated but attenuated form, as in Quine's naturalism.\textsuperscript{22} Like Popper, Peirce and Carnap are concerned to find an empirical procedure to avoid the endless discussion characterizing philosophy.

Fair enough. Yet the very idea of an empirical decision about meaning is problematic for at least four reasons. First, as has been pointed out, the empirical criterion of meaning is problematic, since it is not itself empirical. Second, unless we know what we mean by "empirical," as in "empirical effects," or "empirical verifiability," no distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness can be drawn. Yet the meaning of the criterion cannot be settled empirically, but only normatively. Third, there is no reason, and none has ever been provided, to restrict meaningful philosophical questions or meaningful philosophical doctrines to empirical statements. This approach excludes too much. For example, since Kant's celebrated claim that all knowledge begins in, but is not limited to, experience, is not empirical, a cornerstone of the critical philosophy, would be rejected as meaningless if this criterion were adopted. Fourth, since there is no rational way to justify a verificationist approach to meaning, its application appears arbitrary when applied only to theories one does not happen to like, for instance, those which do not privilege empiricism.

It is not difficult to reply to Peirce and Carnap since they take care to specify their claims. It is more difficult to reply to Heidegger since his view of metaphysics was never clarified and remains unclear. In simplest terms, the later Heidegger rejects metaphysics understood as ontology, but because ontology is understood as identical to philosophy, he in effect rejects philosophy. Since he presents no argument, this rejection appears arbitrary, as a dogmatic assertion without any obvious justification.


It is possible that the later turn against metaphysics is motivated by the failure of Heidegger's original project to renew authentic metaphysics as phenomenological ontology. When the attempt failed, he seems to have concluded that philosophy as such fails. Yet if this is the basis of Heidegger's claim against metaphysics, then this claim is clearly illegitimate. There is no reason to hold that if Heidegger's effort to revive metaphysics fails, all efforts must fail. On strictly Heideggerian grounds, there is no reason to hold that metaphysics is impossible other than the bare assertion of it.

What is more, Heidegger's later attack on metaphysics as ontology is inconsistent. It rests on an approach to ontology, namely his proposed ontological difference, which is difficult to defend and which is not clearly defended after Christian Wolff. If Heidegger were correct about metaphysics as he understands it from the angle of vision of the ontological difference, it would not follow that his suggested refutation affected, say Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Carnap and many others. It follows that Heidegger does not produce a decisive argument against metaphysics.

Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty are epistemological skeptics of a peculiar kind. In the case of each, skepticism is the result of an opposition to epistemological foundationalism, which opposes metaphysics understood, neither as ontology, nor as phenomenological ontology, but as a theory of knowledge. Speaking generally, modern epistemological foundationalism is an epistemological strategy intended to show how we can know absolutely, which Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty refuse for the broadly "Kantian" reason that we can know only that we cannot know absolutely. Yet the refusal of epistemological foundationalism leads to skepticism if and only if to know requires an absolute justification. In other words, the various attacks on epistemology presuppose a strong view of knowledge, which can simply be abandoned without cost, as in the ongoing turn to pragmatism in recent years.

Three Metaphysical Ideas

These few remarks on recent attacks on metaphysics should not be regarded as closing the debate, which seems highly likely to continue into the next century. At a minimum, they indicate that, despite the vigor and frequency of recent attacks on metaphysics, there is no reason to think that such attacks have carried the day. For these and other rea-
sons, I believe one should be wary of overly rapid declarations of victory, slow to award the laurel wreath, careful before conceding that metaphysics however conceived, or at least certain types of metaphysics, do not or, more generally, cannot succeed. The point has not yet been reached at which metaphysics as such, and certainly selected types of metaphysics, cannot be defended. Although the emphasis here concerns the critique of metaphysics in whole or in part, it seems to me that the general record of metaphysical accomplishment in modern times, perhaps ancient times as well, is very strong.

To show that recent attacks on metaphysics do not succeed or, even better, that they fail, is not yet to show that any metaphysical progress is possible, nor that there actually is any metaphysical accomplishment worthy of the name. It could be that although metaphysics cannot be refuted, since none of the objections raised against it is decisive, it also cannot be established. To make the case for metaphysics, or at least a type of metaphysics, one would need to offer a metaphysical concept, idea, or argument which could resist counterarguments. In the modern philosophical tradition, I see three such ideas which now seem solidly in place as permanent additions unlikely to be dislodged or even seriously shaken by later debate. Let me now describe each of them briefly.

To begin with, there is the modern concept of the subject in Descartes and others. Recent efforts by the later Heidegger and postmodernist writers like Foucault to deconstruct this concept in order to return back behind modern philosophy seem unconvincing and caught in a performative contradiction. As Descartes points out, there is no way to deny the subject without affirming it, hence no way to return to an earlier part of the tradition in which the subject had not been made a topic of explicit concern.

Second, there is Kant's equally crucial distinction between appearance and reality, between what, in critical philosophy, is given in experience and can therefore be known, and what lies outside possible experience and can be thought but cannot be known. I believe that this distinction simply lays the ghost of the influential Platonic view (which may not have been Plato's own view), that under certain conditions it is possible to know independent reality as it is. I see no prospect of returning to an earlier view of knowledge of independent reality, or, in
Kantian terms, of understanding the relation of the representation (Vorstellung) to the cognitive object (Gegenstand).

Finally, there is, in Kant’s wake, the equally crucial turn to history in Hegel, as a result of the failure of the Kantian variant of the Cartesian foundationalist project, hence of the failure of this project in any known form. I venture to suggest, although I cannot argue the point here, that the work of the next century will in large part consist in rethinking all the traditional philosophical problems, and new ones which will emerge from a resolutely historical point of view. I believe that claims to know are and should be seen as historically situated, as indexed, so to speak, to the historical moment.

*Metaphysics Today*

I will conclude by returning to my initial theme: metaphysics at the end of the century. My conclusion must be tentative since there is no way to know at present whether or for what reasons writers in the next century will regard the current attacks on metaphysics as decisive or indecisive. My tentative conclusion is that however we understand the term, and this question cannot be settled other than in normative fashion, metaphysics today seems surprisingly alive, not less robust, not less interesting, than it has been throughout a long and very interesting history. It certainly is not yet ready to be consigned to the dustbin of history. At worst, certain types of metaphysics have gone out of fashion, but metaphysics itself is not only apparently healthy, but is likely to endure for as long as philosophy itself endures, which is likely to be as long as there are people who raise general questions about the world and about themselves. ☐