

The Significance of Metaphysics

by
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Submitted to the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy on May 31 2011 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Thesis Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate the nature of metaphysics and the role it plays in our broader theoretical pursuits. In doing so, I defend it against various criticisms and offer a novel conception of why metaphysical disputes are important.

In Chapter One I address the general question of when disputes are defective and when they are worth taking seriously. I first criticize one popular way of answering this question that appeals to the difference between verbal and factual disputes. Verbal disputes involve divergence in what the participants mean by their terms and some think that metaphysical disputes are defective in this way. I argue that this approach fails because the verbal/factual distinction is incapable of doing the work this view requires of it. I then offer an alternative view where the status of a dispute depends on its role in our theorizing. Worthwhile (or, as I call them, significant) disputes are those with appropriate connections to the rest of our theorizing while defective (or insignificant) disputes are insular, with no implications for anything beyond themselves.

In Chapter Two I apply the framework developed in the previous chapter to a pair of ontological disagreements: those over the existence of concrete possible worlds and coincident material objects, like a statue and its clay. The question is whether ontological disputes like these have the requisite theoretical connections to render them significant. I argue that they do. I then address some general reasons for doubting their significance, arguing that they are not compelling.

In Chapter Three I contrast my approach with some other recent defenses of metaphysics, with particular focus on the views developed by Theodore Sider. Metaphysics is, on these views, an inquiry into the world's fundamental structure. I argue that this approach is unsatisfactory because it cannot guarantee that metaphysical disputes are significant in the way I describe. It thus threatens to render metaphysics irrelevant to our other theoretical activities, undermining many of its legitimate successes, like the role theorizing about metaphysical modality played in the development of modal logics applicable in many different fields.

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