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Book Review

Metaphysics and Its Task. Jorge J. E. Gracia. SUNY Press, 1999. 247 pages. Hardcover \$54.50, paperback \$17.95. ISBN 0-7914-4214-4.

Years ago, a running gag among my fellow graduate students was to remark that Carnap was not a bad metaphysician. The point of the quip was that since Carnap was not at all a metaphysician, he couldn't be a bad one. Of course, as we know now (and, unless memory completely fails me, we knew then), Carnap was a metaphysician, if being a metaphysician means that one wrestles with metaphysical topics and issues. And much like John Barleycorn, metaphysics, in Gracia's words, "has always managed to recover itself" from attacks, condemnations and obituaries. There is not now, and never has been, a lack of attention to the nature of abstract entities, relations, personhood, ontological commitment, free will, space and time, and on and on.

Gracia's book contains eight full chapters plus a short introductory chapter and a short concluding chapter. The book might almost be labeled 'meta-metaphysics,' since, rather than delving into particular metaphysical issues (such as the nature of personhood or transcendent being), Gracia focuses on what the nature and task of metaphysics is. His search is to identify what differentiates metaphysics from other endeavors and disciplines. The result is a meticulous (I am very tempted to say scholastic) detailing of views and arguments purporting to identify metaphysics. After rejecting numerous attempts at such identification, which constitutes the first half of the book, Gracia spells out his own view in the second half of the book and responds to objections.

In the second chapter ("Generic and Specific Conditions"), Gracia claims that there have been four overarching traditions about the nature of metaphysics. Philosophers have tended to distinguish metaphysics on the basis of (1) the objects with which metaphysics is concerned, (2) the methods by which the world is investigated, (3) unique aims, and (4) the kinds of knowledge, or propositions, yielded. The subsequent four chapters delve into each of these traditions.

Chapter Three ("Object"), by far the longest of the book – covering sixty pages – provides a taxonomy of types of objects that have been labeled as metaphysical. Two overall groupings are, first, metaphysics as concerned with everything, and, second, metaphysics as concerned with only some things. Under the rubric of 'everything', metaphysics has as its object(s) of study (i) being(s) and nonbeing(s), (ii) being(s), (iii) being *qua* being, and (iv) transcendental being(s). Gracia rejects each of these as being definitive of what metaphysics encompasses (or, at least of what metaphysicians have dealt with). Under the rubric of 'only some things', there is a further classification of only some things in general and only some things in particular. Examples of the former class are: formal being(s)/forms, existential being(s)/existence, causal being(s)/causes,

substantial being(s)/substance(s), and others. Examples of the latter class are: God, person(s), relations, abstract entities, meaning(s), and others. All of the instances of the ‘only some things’ rubric are rejected as being definitive of metaphysics. In each case of an object purported to be definitive of metaphysics, Gracia provides arguments for why the object is seen as a defining candidate and then he provides rebuttals to show why that object, while perhaps being part of the extension of metaphysical concerns, is nonetheless not definitive.

Finding no object(s) as definitive of metaphysics, Gracia turns, in Chapter Four (“Method”), to method as the nature of metaphysics. He enunciates eleven different characterizations of method, including *a priori/a posteriori*, discursive/intuitive, analytic/elucidative/synthetic, phenomenological, dialectical, and others. Each is found wanting. In Chapter Five (“Aim”) five suggested aims are considered: theoretical, practical, ideological, aesthetic, and critical, while in Chapter Six (“Propositions”) five kinds of knowledge said to be defining of metaphysics are critiqued: uniquely different subjects and predicates, analytic *a priori*, synthetic *a posteriori*, synthetic *a priori*, and meaningless. Like the proffered objects and methods, aims and propositions fail to satisfy.

Having investigated these numerous proposals for identifying the nature of metaphysics, Gracia spells out his conception, initially in Chapter Seven (“Definition”). The specificity of metaphysics, he tells us, “can be found in both the object it studies and what it specifically seeks to establish about that object” (p. 132). Later: “...it is in the specific aim and object of metaphysics that we find the *differentia* which distinguishes the discipline from other disciplines and makes a niche for it within philosophy. According to its specific aim, metaphysics is concerned with categorization; according to its object, it is concerned with every category, although with the most general categories in one way and with less general categories in another way” (p. 141). Even later (in his concluding chapter): “My view is quite simple. I claim that metaphysics is the part of philosophy that studies categories: It tries to determine and define (when possible) the most general categories, and to make explicit their interrelations and the relations of less general categories to the most general ones” (p. 220). So while sub-fields of metaphysics, such as ontology, etiology, and theology, might study the less general categories, general metaphysics concerns itself with the most general categories and their interrelations.

With this portrayal of metaphysics in hand, Gracia turns, in Chapter Eight (“Reduction”), to views of categories and of metaphysics that are misguided because of efforts at reduction, which, he says, are commonplace in metaphysics. This chapter provides an analysis of the types and nature of reduction. There are two general kinds of reduction, Gracia claims. In one, a change occurs in the reductive subject, its features or its states, or there is the initiation of an action. Example: reducing a building to rubble. In the other kind of reduction, there is the production of a reductive object that is distinct from the reductive subject. Example: reducing an argument to standard syllogistic form. In either case, reduction involves both replacement and evaluation. These two general kinds of reduction encompass the more specific types of reduction that philosophers usually think of: ontological, epistemological, logical (or conceptual), linguistic, axiological. Of course, there are reasons why we attempt to engage in reduction; it must help produce, develop, and support one view over its rivals. There are various principled values we use in this effort, which Gracia outlines as follows: (1) principle of parsimony (in the development of theories explanatory entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity), (2) principle of acquaintance (the terms used in theoretical

descriptions should refer to entities with which one is directly acquainted), (3) principle of non-contradiction (no theory is acceptable which includes or implies a contradiction), and (4) principle of analysis (knowledge of X is best achieved through knowledge of X's components).

Chapter Nine (“Realism, Conceptualism, Nominalism”) provides an analysis of categories followed by a scolding of philosophers who have attempted “to reduce categories to what they are not, either by reifying, conceptualizing, or nominalizing them” (p. 217). It is the ontological status of categories that determines whether a metaphysical approach is realist, conceptualist, or nominalist. Given this, Gracia details a taxonomy of positions with respect to this status. Various positions have identified categories with: transcendental entities, immanent constituents of things, similarities, collections, concepts, types, and tokens. As the reader can probably expect by now, none of these positions proves adequate, none encompass all the ways that we understand categories. Rather, much like the group of blind men who each try to identify the nature of an elephant by exposure to only part of it, they each capture some ways in which we understand categories, but not all ways in which we do. The trouble is the attempt at unwarranted reduction. As he says, “Categories considered *qua* categories, then, cannot, in virtue of being categories, be exclusively conceived as words, or concepts, or extra-mental entities” (p. 206). How, then, should we understand categories? Well, it's not clear. The closest thing to a definition, or even characterization, is the following: “A category is whatever is expressed by a simple or complex term or expression which is predicable of some other term or expression” (p. 200). Readers hoping for greater clarification are told simply to avoid categorial reduction: “My proposal, then, is to respect the integrity of categories. *Each category, qua category, should be considered to be whatever it is, as determined by its proper definition, and nothing more*, for that is what the predicable terms that names the category expresses” (p. 205). (Italics in original.) For example: “human is just human, and the category human is just human and nothing more or less. The addition of the term ‘category’ to ‘human’ in the expression ‘category human’ adds to human only the recognition that human is what is expressed by the predicable term ‘human’ and as such is different from Socrates, which is expressed by the non-predicable term ‘Socrates’” (p. 207). Gracia ends the chapter and book by fielding various objections and reiterating that “to ask about the reality, being, or manner of being of categories *qua* categories is nonsense” (p. 216).

What are we to make of Gracia's book? On the back cover of the book Nicholas Rescher is quoted as saying: “As a contemporary introduction to the problems of metaphysics there is nothing like it.” I am certainly inclined to agree, at least in terms of what I began by calling “meta-metaphysics.” If a reader wants an introduction to particular problems of metaphysics (such as the issue of events or tropes or free will), that is not Gracia's focus. However, as an overview, indeed as a detailed analysis of various conceptual and historical approaches to the field of metaphysics, it is remarkable. However, it's what's not in the book that is of concern to me. First, while Gracia's rejection of reductive efforts by realists, conceptualists, and nominalists is understandable, to expect a fuller, more positive enunciation of what categories are is not tantamount to asking for, or demanding, an illegitimate reduction. I wish more time had been spent on saying what categories are or on why any attempt to define them is reductive (in a bad sense) than on what's wrong with realism, conceptualism, and nominalism.

This leads to my second concern, which is again about what's not in the book. For Gracia, an analysis of metaphysics is not simply interesting, but “metaphysics is inescapable” (p. 221). The

reason metaphysics will never perish, he tells us, is that it deals with the most general categories and their relations to less general ones. So every discipline rests on metaphysical foundations. “All our knowledge depends on metaphysical views whether we are aware of it or not, and all our thinking involves metaphysical thinking” (p. 221). It is exactly this view that many philosophers reject or say is unhelpful and, so, it is exactly this view that I wish Gracia had spent more time elucidating. For example, today there is a strong chorus of voices proclaiming allegiance to naturalism (whatever that is!). Gracia’s book, I believe, would have been stronger had he addressed the issue of how naturalism is really a metaphysical view and how/why philosophers are mistaken to think otherwise. Further, the book would have been stronger had he shown how/why one is engaging in metaphysics when one looks at, say, what are the units of selection (philosophy of biology), or whether or not rights are claims (social/political philosophy), or whether or not, or in what ways, either of these two issues involve patriarchal assumptions (feminist theory). That is, if metaphysics is truly inescapable, then Gracia could have better spent his time showing us how and why, and done so by providing some cases along with general analysis.

Finally, again in terms of what I wish Gracia had done, he tells us that metaphysics “tries to determine and define (when possible) the most general categories, and to make explicit their interrelations and the relations of less general categories to the most general ones” (p. 220). How? That is, back to the issue of method, how does metaphysics do this? Gracia rejected (in Chapter Four) various suggestions that metaphysics can be identified with a particular method. That’s fine. But now, what method(s) are we to associate with the task of metaphysics to determine and define categories, etc.? This, after all, was much of the concern by philosophers early in the 20th century: how is metaphysical analysis reliable? Why should it be taken seriously, at least in terms of method? Just how are we to go about determining and defining categories? How are we to settle metaphysical disputes? It strikes me that it is the failure of metaphysics (or metaphysicians) to answer these sorts of questions that has led philosophers to identify themselves with, say, naturalism. With naturalism, at least (they say), we have a clear sense of how to proceed and what counts as an answer to our questions. It is this sort of issue, rather than how nominalism is inappropriately reductive, that I wish Gracia had examined.

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