

Method, Metaphysics, and Meaning in the Study of Cognition

Abstract:

In their 2007 *Every Thing Must Go* (ETMG), Ladyman and Ross (L&R) provide what is perhaps the most devastating critique of analytic metaphysics offered since the hey-day of logical positivism – though, unlike the logical positivists, L&R’s critique is concerned not with the meaning of metaphysical claims but with the method employed in arriving at them. I set forward this critique and take a look at the defense of analytic metaphysics offered in Dorr’s (2009) review of ETMG. I rebut this defense in turn but follow up a suggestion from Dorr on how we might re-conceptualize metaphysics as a conceptual investigation by turning to a discussion of Hacker’s (2003, 2009) conception of metaphysics, the role of philosophy, and proper philosophical method – including, importantly, Hacker’s distinction between two distinct but oft conflated enterprises: viz. the ‘quest for knowledge’ and the ‘quest for understanding’.

To further elucidate Hacker’s method, and the manner in which it is supposed to respect the just noted distinction, I turn to Dennett’s (2009) criticism of Hacker’s conception of the proper method and the manner in which Hacker employs this method and then to Hacker’s defense. I rebut Hacker’s defense in turn, but not without saving his distinction between the two types of enterprise. This leads me to a discussion of Dennett’s self-described Sellarsian conception of the nature and role of philosophy vis-à-vis the sciences and cognitive science in particular. With this, I consider where Dennett’s conception stands in the light of L&R’s view of the method and role of philosophy, again particularly when we take cognitive science to be the relevant science.

Finally, I reconcile the insights of Hacker and Dennett on this matter and point out the blindspot within which they fall for L&R. In particular, I make a case for the claim that Dennett’s Sellarsian project of reconciling the relevant manifest and scientific images (viz. our ordinary-language intentional talk, on the one hand, and, on the other, our cognitive scientific theories of the capacities loosely described by the former), as facilitated by his distinction between the personal and subpersonal levels of explanation, is an instance of Hacker’s quest for understanding, as distinguished from the quest for knowledge – the latter being *all* that L&R recognize.

L&R are right to critique analytic metaphysics, if conceived of as aiming to limn the (ultimate) structure of objective reality – again, *not* for flying in the face of meaningful discourse or falling into nonsense but for failing to support its claims by any reliable method. If one conceives of metaphysics as part of the knowledge enterprise, then indeed analytic metaphysics is off on the wrong foot: its method, which makes ineliminable appeal to intuition, is unreliable. But if one reconceives metaphysics as a conceptual investigation, along the lines that Hacker elaborates, where what is at issue are forms of description, or norms of representation, then it *can* be of assistance to the sciences – and in particular cognitive science. Modulo Dennett’s remarks on Hacker’s understanding and practice of the relevant philosophical method, this is a worthwhile pursuit; and it is worthwhile for several reasons not all of which L&R appreciate.

In the first place, where understanding, in the sense in which Hacker distinguishes this from knowledge, is possible, it is worth having – not for any further end, but in its own right. L&R again fail to appreciate this. It is unsurprising, then, that they further fail to appreciate that our relation to cognitive science differs importantly from our relation to (say) quantum physics and chemistry. It is different precisely in that, in the case of cognitive science, but not in the cases of these other sciences, the object of inquiry is us ourselves *qua* thinkers. Besides this, there is a point that L&R, with their sole concern with the knowledge enterprise, should still appreciate: namely, that, in the case of cognitive science, the manifest image is not so easy to leave behind and, in any case, *has not been left behind* by many cognitive scientists – as is evidenced by their research. Indeed, cognitive scientists, *provided their object of study*, are perforce required continually to move between the images. Addressing these issues seems to be a worthwhile philosophical pursuit distinct from, but not in tension or at odds with, L&R's project of unifying the various scientific theories. Nor is it impugned by their criticisms of analytic metaphysics as traditionally and – alas – still commonly conceived.