METAPHYSICS AND CONCEPTUAL NEGOTIATION

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Interest has been growing in the idea that metaphysics fundamentally involves normative conceptual work: work in what has come to be called 'conceptual ethics' and 'conceptual engineering'. As Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett understand it, conceptual ethics involves questions about "which concepts [we should] use to think and talk about the world" (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 1091). Work in conceptual ethics may also take us into conceptual engineering: the work of (re-)designing concepts to better serve certain functions.

The idea that philosophy centrally involves normative conceptual work is not entirely new. One sees it in Carnap (1950/1956), and more recently, in the work of Simon Blackburn, who writes that "just as the engineer studies the structure of material things, so the philosopher studies the structure of thought" (1999, 2). More recently still, similar views have been defended by David Plunkett (2015) and Matti Eklund, who suggests more broadly that "Philosophy should . . . be thought of as *conceptual engineering"* (2015, 364).

For metaontological deflationists like myself, the idea that metaphysics has often been and can be engaged in normative conceptual work is particularly helpful and important. I have argued elsewhere (2015) that ontological questions can be answered 'easily'. That is, meaningful, well-formed questions about whether things of a given kind exist can be answered by a combination of conceptual work and (often) straightforward empirical work, and often can be answered (in the affirmative) by trivial inferences from uncontested premises. Metaphysical modal questions, too, I have argued (2007, 2013), can typically be addressed by a combination of empirical work and conceptual analysis.

The central virtue of deflationism is that it takes us away from the epistemological mysteries of 'serious metaphysics'. Those engaged in 'serious metaphysics' see metaphysics as aiming to discover deep, worldly truths,

where this is not just a matter of engaging in conceptual work nor straight-forward empirical enquiry. Serious metaphysicians insist that there is distinctive work for metaphysicians to do in addressing questions that are, in Ted Sider's phrase "epistemically metaphysical", in the sense that they are neither answerable by conceptual analysis nor by straightforward empirical means (Sider 2011, 187). But the epistemological challenges such views face are all too familiar—leading to concerns about a rivalry with science, to 'results' that proliferate rather than converging, and to difficulties in articulating what the methodology for discovering such epistemically metaphysical facts should be.[1]

But while they avoid the epistemological mysteries of serious metaphysics, metaontological deflationists have often been criticized as leaving us with a conception of metaphysics as (at best) conceptual analysis—a view that is said to make metaphysics shallow and uninteresting. As I have argued elsewhere, however, by seeing metaphysical work as capable of doing not just *descriptive* conceptual analysis, but also *normative* conceptual work, deflationists can respect intuitions that much work in metaphysics is difficult and of worldly significance and interest (see my 2015 and 2017). For choices about how we ought to use central concepts are both worldly and important. Consider work done in determining how central concepts such as *person* should be employed. How we employ our concept of 'person'—what counts as a person, and as the same person over time, *matters* to real worldly issues: to whether (or when) we permit abortion, or permit euthanasia, to who we see as responsible for crimes or debts, or eligible for inheritance, property rights, and moral rights. It is easy to see how significant worldly issues similarly arise in determining whether or how to employ such concepts as *art, freedom,* and *death.* Even for what seem like the most abstract concepts of metaphysics—such as *event*—the way we employ these concepts matters for real worldly issues. In determining the insurance payout for the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, billions of dollars were at stake in determining whether the attack counted as one event or two—a decision that relied on principles about how we do and should individuate events. As I have argued elsewhere (2017), thinking of metaphysics as capable of being engaged in this sort of normative conceptual work gives us a conception of what metaphysics can do that doesn't risk a rivalry with science, and that makes it clear that just 'giving up' work on such issues as a result of pervasive skepticism that we can 'know' the 'answers' would be entirely the wrong move. For we must go on employing a conceptual scheme. Giving up work on which one we *should* employ would be misguided and counter-productive. Perhaps most importantly, it gives us a view on which deflationists can retain the sense that metaphysics may do something worldly and important, while still demystifying its methodology—understanding it as engaged in empirical, descriptive-conceptual, and normative-conceptual work.

But a threat to this approach remains. For if we accept that a proper role for metaphysics involves investigating what sorts of conceptual scheme we should employ (and how it should work), we must ask what methods can and should be used in doing this sort of work. Serious metaphysicians, even when they recognize the importance of conceptual ethics, typically insist that the proper standards for assessing conceptual choices appeal to metaphysics. Call these 'metaphysical' approaches to conceptual choice. For (some might say) we should, for example, only adopt concepts that turn out to refer to the things that *exist*—the rest are defective. But if that is so, it might seem that we must first settle the metaphysical existence question before we can settle the question in conceptual ethics. If the best approach to conceptual choice itself requires appeal to epistemically metaphysical facts for guidance or assessment, then of course the metaontological deflationist is in trouble. For if normative conceptual work, properly done, relies on 'epistemically metaphysical' work, then in appealing to normative conceptual work, the deflationist loses her epistemic advantages over serious metaphysics.

In Section 1 I will argue that such metaphysical approaches are undesirable, for they land us in the sorts of epistemological mysteries that deflationism was designed to avoid. I will also argue that these difficulties are not relieved by common replies that take the epistemology of metaphysics to parallel the epistemology of the natural sciences or that take metaphysical theories to be confirmed with scientific ones.

There are other options available for deflationists—for example that we adopt a pragmatic approach to conceptual ethics (see my forthcoming b). On the pragmatic approach, we do not first answer metaphysical questions about, say, the existence of numbers to figure out whether we should adopt nominative number terms into our conceptual scheme. Instead, we may have pragmatic reasons for introducing noun terms for numbers (e.g. to simplify our statements of scientific laws (Yablo 2005)). Given the way number terms are introduced, once we have them in our scheme we may make easy inferences that entitle us to conclude there are numbers—apparently answering the metaphysical question about the existence of numbers, in the only sense it has. In brief, on the pragmatic view our conceptual scheme may be chosen pragmatically, and its choice will (often combined with empirical investigations) *entitle* us to make claims about existence. But pragmatic approaches to conceptual choice are widely distrusted and rejected on grounds that they make our conceptual choices merely arbitrary or subjective. In Section 2, however, I will argue that these common concerns about pragmatic approaches to conceptual choice can be met. There is no need for such views to make conceptual choice arbitrary or subjective, for such choices may be constrained by both an appeal to functions, and to the worldly factors that impact the ability of various conceptual schemes to fulfill their function(s). As a result, taking a metaphysical approach to conceptual choice is *unnecessary* as well as *undesirable*.

Nonetheless, a line of worry remains. For, in order to show that our pragmatic conceptual choices need not be arbitrary or subjective, the deflationist appeals to ways in which worldly factors may play a role in constraining pragmatically-governed conceptual choices. But if she does so, the thought is, the deflationist must inevitably draw on *metaphysical* claims about what does and does not exist. If so, then the deflationist *must* after all rely on serious metaphysics in engaging in conceptual ethics—even if she attempts to conceive of this methodology pragmatically. In Section 3 I will respond to this worry, showing how a pragmatic approach can be devised which is world-responsive but which does not presuppose serious metaphysics and become entangled in its epistemological mysteries.

If the pragmatic approach to conceptual ethics is a viable, and perhaps even preferable, alternative to metaphysical approaches, and does not itself tacitly rely on serious metaphysics, then the deflationist can after all appeal to normative conceptual work as a useful model for what metaphysics can and should do.

1. Metaphysical approaches to conceptual choice

Someone who takes the metaphysical approach to conceptual ethics, in broad strokes, is someone who thinks that *the metaphysical facts of the world* play a central role in determining which conceptual scheme we ought to use. Many metaphysicians who are tempted to think that conceptual ethics should play a role in metaphysics are naturally inclined towards a metaphysical approach. For this approach seems better suited to capture the metaphysician's self-conception that metaphysics is about the world, that it is not just a matter of investigating our concepts or terms or how we use them (Sider 2011, 6). It is also thought to ensure that it does not make our conceptual choices arbitrary or subjective: for there is an objective worldly standard to which such choices are answerable.

Metaphysical approaches may take various forms. The existential version of the approach is perhaps most familiar.[2] The idea is that a central norm for conceptual choice is that we should adopt only those concepts that correspond to things that *exist*. But then (the thought is) we must do metaphysics in order to properly engage in conceptual choice. Peter van Inwagen (2016) suggests something along these lines. He recounts Carnap's reading of a nominalist ('Norma') as implicitly suggesting that we switch to a nominalist language, and responds:

> ...if Norma is engaged in a project in logic or semantics, *why* is she engaged in it? Why, obviously, because she does not think that there *are* any things but concrete objects, because she thinks that there *are* no numbers (2016, 17).

In general, one metaphysical approach to conceptual ethics is to think that one ought first to do the metaphysical work, of determining what things (really) exist, and then adopt only those terms or concepts that succeed at referring. Robert Kraut describes a similar view (without endorsing it):[3] "One discovers in light of the evidence that Ks exist; only then does one regard the adoption of certain linguistic forms as warranted" (2016, 49–50).

On this view, the serious metaphysician allows that we can (for example) take the nominalist or organicist to be recommending revisions in our conceptual scheme: namely, that we cease using nominative number language or terms for composite inanimate objects—at least in positive atomic assertions. But they insist that they are doing so *on metaphysical grounds:* that we should make these conceptual changes *because there are no numbers or composite inanimate material objects to refer to.* In this way, metaphysics (here, in particular, ontology) remains primary, as it is the standard by which we are to engage in and assess moves in conceptual ethics (or at least those that involve the choice of nominative terms and concepts, which are *supposed to* refer).

An existential approach to conceptual ethics faces certain familiar problems, however. For taking our conceptual choices to require guidance or adjudication by the metaphysical facts about what exists lands us in the familiar epistemological difficulties facing serious metaphysics. Is there a distinct philosophical way of answering existence questions—particularly about material objects—that doesn't lead to a rivalry with science? How are we supposed to determine which among the ever-proliferating answers to these ontological existence questions we should choose? In certain cases, one can defend a negative existence claim by alleging a contradiction in the concept, but such cases are rare and generally contestable—as the elements that are supposed to figure in the conceptual explication can often be rejected or reinterpreted. More often, those who defend ontological views do so by appealing to general metaphysical principles to justify their choice over alternatives (e.g. 'no co-location', 'no causal redundancy', 'nothing that is not in space and time', 'nothing without causal powers')—principles that push the epistemological question back a notch.

Of course serious metaphysicians haven't been without responses to this epistemological quandary. An increasingly popular approach to the epistemology of metaphysics, popularized by David Lewis' arguments for possible worlds, is to take it to parallel the epistemology of science. That is: we find our best metaphysical theories by appeal to the theoretic virtues such as empirical adequacy, simplicity, explanatory power, unity, and so on, and take these virtues to give us reason to think that our theories are true. This is an approach recently defended by Laurie Paul, who argues that "We use theoretical desiderata as guides to truth in metaphysics just as we use such desiderata as guides to truth in science" (2012, 21). Thus one regularly sees metaphysical theories defended by appeal to their having greater simplicity,

unity, or explanatory power than their rivals, or as being justified via an inference to the best explanation.

But it is far from clear that scientific inquiry and metaphysical inquiry are parallel. For competing metaphysical theories are, as their defenders acknowledge, typically empirically equivalent. By contrast, in science 'even approximate empirical equivalence is very rare' (Paul 2012, 12). If it is only theoretic virtues *other than* empirical adequacy at issue in debates between rival metaphysical theories, it is unclear why we should think that these differences—in the simplicity of the theory or its parsimonious ontology, in its explanatory power, etc.—are really apt to track truth, rather than just marking the usefulness of the theory for limited creatures like ourselves (see Bricker forthcoming). A related worry, as Karen Bennett (2009) and Uriah Kriegel (2013) have argued at length, is that quite typically competing metaphysical theories involve simply trading off one theoretic virtue for another, leaving us at sea in aiming to determine which metaphysical theory to choose. Paul accepts that there is a difference of degree here, but insists that this difference in degree doesn't undermine the truth-conduciveness of appeals to the theoretic virtues in metaphysics, "If such theoretical desiderata are truth conducive in science, they are also truth conducive in metaphysics" (2012, 21).[4]

Even if one is prepared to accept that the theoretic virtues other than empirical adequacy are truth-conducive in the sciences, and one is willing to live with relative indeterminateness and uncertainty for metaphysics, deeper worries can be raised. For there are grounds for thinking there may be a difference not just in degree, but in kind, between metaphysical theories and scientific theories—differences that prevent us from thinking that any truth-conduciveness the theoretic virtues (beyond empirical adequacy) have in the scientific case carries over to metaphysical theories. Michael Huemer (2009) works through four different accounts of the evidential value of parsimony in empirical theorizing, and argues that none applies to the philosophical cases, suggesting that in typical philosophical contexts ontological simplicity has no evidential value. Scott Shalkowski (2010) argues that inference to the best explanation can be empirically shown to be a reliable mode of inference where it concerns observables (so that there is the possibility of independent access to confirm its results), but not where its conclusions concern unobservable facts (2010, 177). Shalkowski concludes that, while inference to the best explanation may be perfectly good in the ordinary empirical cases that motivate it, "there is little hope to be found in the use of [inference to the best explanation] to settle metaphysical questions" (2010, 184). Juha Saatsi (2016) argues that there are differences in kind for the use of inference to the best explanation in science (whether one deals with claims about observable or unobservable entities) versus in metaphysics. For we lack empirical feedback to guide our explanatory practices in metaphysics. These differences, he argues, suggest that the reliability of inference to the

best explanation in science doesn't carry over to metaphysics: it is hard "to conceive of a naturalistically acceptable account of the truth-conduciveness of explanationism in metaphysics" (2016, 176)—though we may have such an account available for its use in inferences about both observables and unobservables in science.

There is not space to try to settle this issue here. But it is worth noting that relying on parallels between metaphysical and scientific appeals to theoretic virtues relies on much wider issues about whether those parallels hold—and whether, even if we assume that the theoretic virtues other than empirical adequacy are truth-conducive (rather than merely pragmatic) in the sciences, we have reason to think that carries over in metaphysics. If we can find a plausible approach to conceptual ethics that isn't hostage to these epistemological mysteries, that would certainly be an advantage. I will argue below that the pragmatic approach is just such an option.

Of course metaphysicians have other epistemological options. Another popular option is to take a more purely naturalistic approach: taking metaphysical theories not as confirmed in ways *parallel to* the ways theories in natural science are confirmed, but rather taking them to be confirmed *with* our scientific theories. That is, on this view, our scientific theories have a certain ontological content—whether in terms of ontological presuppositions or explicit claims; whether they wear this on their face or whether we must tease it out by expressing the theory in standard notation. Either way, the thought is, that our best 'total' scientific theories have ontological content, which is confirmed along with those theories. As Sider expresses the point:

> We should believe generally what good theories say; so if a good theory makes an ontological claim, we should believe it. The ontological claim took part in a theoretical success, and therefore inherits a borrowed luster; it merits our belief. (2011, 12).[5]

While this is a common sentiment, there are reasons to doubt that what one might call the 'ontological content' of a theory is confirmed along with a scientific theory— 'inheriting the luster of predictive success'. Katherine Hawley (2006) (following Stathis Psillos (1999)) suggests a reasonable criterion for distinguishing what claims are and are not confirmed with a theory's predictive success: a claim's 'involvement' in a successful scientific theory can be thought of as giving some reason to think it's true when it is involved in generating a prediction in a way that entitles it to share in the confirmation (2006, 462)—when (as Psillos puts it) it "fuels" the theory's predictive success (1999, 110). This seems entirely apt—but what is it for a claim to be involved in the success of a theory? Hawley puts it this way:

> "If a claim H is to be involved in generating a prediction in a way that entitles it to share in the confirmation which successful prediction brings . . . H must satisfy

two conditions with respect to the generation of the prediction. First, it must be the case that the theory minus H cannot generate the prediction alone. Second, it must also be the case that there is no available, sensible alternative to H which could have done the work just as well." (2006, 462)

These seem like entirely reasonable criteria. But it is doubtful that the ontological content of a theory passes these tests.

One way of spelling out the first condition is to distinguish what aspects of a theory do and do not entitle it to share in the confirmation by using Stephen Yablo's method of 'subtracting' presuppositions from the assertive content of a theory. Yablo (2009, 519) develops the machinery for drawing this distinction. He distinguishes the presuppositions of a claim from its 'assertive content', where the assertive content of the sentence is its analytic implications that remain when we 'subtract' the presupposition. Yablo argues that presuppositions about the existence of abstracta are 'fail-safe' in the sense that, even if we think that certain sentences (e.g. 'the number of planets is eight') presuppose the existence of numbers, that presupposition could fail without the truth-value of the assertive content of the sentence. That is, even if there 'turn out to be' no numbers, the assertive content of the sentence—that there are eight planets—does not change in truth-value. Such *fail-safe* presuppositions of our theoretical claims are unlike other theoretical presuppositions. For example, saying 'Vulcan orbits the sun five times in an Earth year' presupposes that there is a planet Vulcan. But the failure of *that* presupposition, unlike the one about numbers, (in Yablo's words) 'wrecks' the whole assertive enterprise. I have argued elsewhere (2014) that if we accept Yablo's approach, his conclusions can and should be generalized. For, I have argued (2014), in general *ontological* assumptions fit his model as fail-safe presuppositions, while *empirical* presuppositions are not fail-safe.[6] That is to say, one might suppose that (positive, atomic) use of terms such as 'table', 'mereological sum', or 'property' presuppose that there are tables, mereological sums, or properties. But even if we think that our use of such terms has these presuppositions, those presuppositions are fail-safe. For these ontological presuppositions could fail without altering the truth-value of the assertive content of the claims of the theory. If I say 'the mereological sum of the particles in solution weighs 29 grams', then the assertive content of this claim (that the particles in solution jointly weigh 29 grams) retains its truth-value regardless of whether or not there 'really are' mereological sums. Indeed the many 'ontologically alternative' languages invented in recent years to enable revisionary ontologists to still capture 'what we wanted to say about the world' even while denying the existence of composite material objects, persons, properties, etc., often enable us to find an alternative way of expressing the assertive content of a claim while 'subtracting' the presupposed ontology.

Yablo's machinery gives one natural way to divide what is and is not confirmed with a theory. For it is natural to think that it is the *assertive content* of a theory, along with its non-fail-safe presuppositions, that is confirmed by a theory's predictive success. But where ontological presuppositions are fail-safe, they make no difference to the truth of the assertive content of the claims of the theory. Thus ontological assumptions fail to meet Hawley's criterion (1): the theory minus H (the ontological presupposition) *could* yield the prediction alone; indeed it could yield the prediction even if H turns out to be false. This gives us reason to think that the ontological presuppositions of a theory do not affect the truth-value of the assertive content of a theory, and so do not inherit confirmation—since they could fail and yet the theory's assertive content be equally well confirmed. Given this difference, there *does* seem to be a difference in kind between confirming the assertive content of a scientific theory (or its non-fail-safe presuppositions), and confirming the ontological assumptions it comes with—those that form its fail-safe presuppositions.

But suppose one wants to resist the idea that a theory's ontology is merely a *presupposition* of the theory rather than part of its assertive content. Even if one attempted to add to a theory explicit statements that a certain ontological claim is true, we have reason to doubt that these inherit the theory's confirmation. On Elliott Sober's (1993) contrastive view of confirmation, a theory is never confirmed in isolation, but rather *relative to alternative theories:* "the evidence we have for the theories we accept is evidence that favors those theories *over others*" (1993, 39). As a result, Sober argues, mathematics is not confirmed with scientific theories—however well confirmed the scientific theories that employ mathematics may be—as long as the competing theories employ the same mathematical assumptions. For "if the mathematical statements M are part of *every* competing hypothesis, then, no matter which hypothesis comes out best in the light of the observations, M will be part of that best hypothesis. M is not tested by this exercise, but is simply a background assumption common to the hypotheses under test" (1993, 45). "If the mathematical statements M are part of each hypothesis under test, then the observational outcome does not favor M *over any of its competitors*" (1993, 45).

What Sober says about mathematics here can be applied equally well to the ontology of a scientific theory. Suppose we have two competing theories, both of which employ an ontology of material objects (as opposed to, say, an ontology expressed in a feature-placing language or a language of particles arranged in certain ways). The ontology is not confirmed with those theories as long as it is common to both. One could 'confirm' the ontology only if one could compare two theories that *differ* in these ontological respects, where the change in ontology confers "different probabilities on some set O of statements that can be checked by observation" (1993, 45). And so, by this principle, a theory's ontology could be confirmed only if the differences in

ontology between two theories led to different probabilities on certain predictions of each—there is no default confirmation of ontology with theory. In standard cases, this sort of difference will be hard to find. For in typical ontological debates, all participants agree that there are *no* differences in empirical predictions that arise based on whether we accept, say, an ontology of ordinary material objects, or only particles in certain arrangements, or only features.[7] Without such differences attributable to the two competing ontologies, it is hard to give credit to the thought that confirmation of a scientific theory includes confirmation of its ontology over other ontological alternatives.

The contrastive method and the assertive content method both seem like good ways to start to articulate what it means for a part of a theory to be 'involved in generating a prediction in a way that shares the confirmation'. For if a part of a theory (such as its ontology) could be false without the predictive success of the theory being altered, or if we cannot find a case in which a rival theory that differs *only in* ontological respects gives different probabilities on predictions, it is hard to see why we should credit that particular ontological assumption with the success, and treat it as being confirmed with the theory's success. If we cannot, however, then we cannot rest contented with suggestions that the ontology of a scientific or 'total' theory shares in the theory's confirmation. In short, the serious metaphysician is still in need of a clear and plausible epistemology for metaphysics. Unless or until that is forthcoming, we will be better off if we do not require a metaphysical approach to engage in the important work of conceptual ethics.

2. Deflationary Approaches to Conceptual Choice

If the above is correct, then we shouldn't lament the fact that a metaontological deflationist can't avail herself of a metaphysical approach to conceptual choice. For such approaches bring back all the epistemological problems with serious metaphysics that the deflationist aimed to avoid.

But what else can one do? The deflationist who aims to reconceive of some of the most interesting work of metaphysics as concerned with conceptual ethics must have something to say about how we can and should engage in this work—and do so without appealing to any epistemically metaphysical facts.

There are various options available for giving a plausible and constrained approach to conceptual ethics that meet this requirement. One option is to take a transcendental approach to understanding the need for certain very fundamental concepts, whether as essential to engaging in reasoning or to worldly perception at all. Another way of showing at least some of our fundamental concepts to be non-arbitrary, and yet not require *metaphysical* justification, is to consider evolutionary explanations of our possession

of certain fundamental concepts of 'core cognition' (Carey 2009)—where these themselves need not rely on claims that the relevant concepts match 'metaphysical reality' (see my 2013). I will not pursue either of these routes here—I simply want to make evident that these are open options even for a deflationist to account for the non-arbitrariness of certain fundamental concepts (if such there are). But neither of these is likely to be a promising *global* strategy for defending a deflationary approach to conceptual ethics, since so many of our everyday concepts, including 'student', 'work of art', 'athlete', and the like, are not plausibly basic in either of these ways.

Elsewhere (forthcoming b) I have begun to develop and defend a pragmatic approach to conceptual ethics, which can be extended more globally, or married with a transcendental or evolutionary justification of our most basic concepts. But those with serious metametaphysical inclinations tend to be suspicious of pragmatic approaches to conceptual choice, for two reasons. First, some worry that a pragmatic approach leaves us unable to account for intuitions that the world has structure, and that accordingly some conceptual choices (e.g. lithium rather than *lithium on earth*) are just objectively better than others (Sider 2011, 18–19). Second, if one does not appeal to metaphysical features to serve as standards for conceptual choice, one might worry that the pragmatic approach "...suggests that normative issues about what concepts we should use can be settled by voluntary choices that we ourselves make", leaving such choices subjective (Plunkett 2015, 860–61). And if they are then subjective, not constrained by metaphysical facts, one might worry that these conceptual choices are doomed to being arbitrary.

I have elsewhere (forthcoming b) suggested how a pragmatic approach to conceptual choice can be developed that can preserve ordinary intuitions of structure, and avoid accusations that such choices must be merely arbitrary or subjective. That approach begins from the idea that our terms or concepts may serve many different functions. If we engage in conceptual engineering, it is natural here, as with other engineering problems, to begin by determining the function that is to be served by the relevant term, concept, or conceptual scheme.[8] Once a purpose (or multiple purposes) is/are identified, we can go on to use that in evaluating whether the term or concept in question should be retained, rejected, or revised, and what sort of rules or constraints would best (or better) enable it to fulfill its function(s). We can also take into account worldly factors in determining whether or how well a term, concept, or conceptual scheme is able to fulfill a given function—just as a civil engineer must take into account worldly factors in determining how well a bridge, pulley, or machine fulfills its function(s). But just as we needn't suppose that one solution to an engineering problem is uniquely best, so in taking a pragmatic approach to conceptual engineering, we needn't suppose that there is a single best or 'uniquely correct' conceptual scheme to

adopt—though some may certainly be better or worse than others for given purposes.

It is plausible that some words—including predicates that aim to pick out 'natural' properties and relations to serve in our scientific theories—have the function of serving in explanatory and predictive scientific theories. Given that function, there are worldly constraints on what concepts we ought to adopt that can give us grounds for making non-arbitrary conceptual choices. This makes it easy to see why we do better to have in our chemical theory the current chemical concept of 'lithium' rather than a concept that would apply to lithium on earth, but not to the same chemical kind if found on Mars (cf. Sider 2011, 7). Geographic constraints in themselves are not helpful to chemical explanations and predictions; the limited 'lithium' concept would not be as useful in a chemical theory. The pragmatic approach can thereby take into account our ordinary intuitions that some concepts are 'objectively better' than others, and that conceptual choice in such cases must be world-responsive. But if we accept that our concepts may serve many different functions (not just the function of playing a given role in a predictive/explanatory theory), it won't *always* be apt to criticize a concept for failing to 'track the joints of reality' or serve well in our predictive and explanatory theories.

Even in such cases, however, the pragmatic approach can nonetheless allow that the way we engineer a concept to fulfill its function is not merely arbitrary. For, as I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming b), such conceptual work is nonetheless constrained by worldly factors that impact the concept's ability to fulfill its function. For example, suppose that function of a marriage concept is to ensure preservation of certain rights and obligations governing close human relationships that involve intertwining of lives, often including childrearing, etc. If that is the case then, in the right empirical circumstances (where many of those in relationships that meet these criteria are same-sex couples) that can give us grounds for conceptual revision—extending the criteria we use in applying the concept. Given the appeal to function and to worldly factors, that extension is not merely arbitrary and may be objectively better than the narrower alternative. Conceptual choice and re-engineering, I have argued, is also (like civil engineering) constrained by 'site constraints' involving its connections to the rest of our conceptual scheme and surrounding practices. The concept of *death,* as Gert et. al. (2006) make clear, is intimately connected to concepts such as life, appropriate object of medical procedures, funeral proceedings, reading of the will, etc., and no revisions in the concept should be undertaken without attending to the repercussions such re-engineering would have for the related systems of concepts. In conceptual engineering no less than civil engineering, the question of which designs (of concept or bridge) will serve the requirements of the function well, or better or worse, given worldly factors and surrounding site constraints, does not leave room for a merely 'arbitrary' answer.

3. The No Exit Problem

I have argued that the deflationist may take a purely pragmatic approach to conceptual ethics, and that in doing so, she need not hold that our conceptual choices are merely arbitrary or subjective—for there may be real worldly factors (as well as site constraints) that determine which conceptual schemes turn out to be better or worse at fulfilling certain functions.

But in insisting that pragmatic conceptual choices may have worldly constraints and involve world-oriented discovery, the deflationist might be thought to get herself in trouble. Robert Kraut examines a related position, which he attributes to a fictionalized figure close to Carnap, whom he calls 'Carnap*'. Kraut's Carnap* holds an expressivist view of existence claims, seeing these as expressions of commitments to the pragmatic utility of adopting certain linguistic frameworks (2016, 40). Kraut acknowledges that Carnap* can account for the feeling that discovery is involved in metaphysical disputes, saying:

> . . . he notes that a theorist *discovers* (rather than stipulates) the utilities associated with a given discursive framework, and discovers the consequences of any commitments she might undertake. One discovers what is (or is not) pragmatically advisable; one discovers whether a commitment brings other commitments in its wake . . . (2016, 51).

This of course is entirely in harmony with (part of) the response I have given above to the problem of arbitrariness and subjectivity.

Kraut worries, however, that this way of constraining a pragmatic approach to choice of a 'framework' leads his Carnap* to a problematic circularity, which he labels the 'no exit' problem:

> Discovery that a given linguistic framework is pragmatically beneficial requires discovery that the framework facilitates transactions with the world and brings one closer to one's goals. It is impossible to make pragmatic assessments of a tool's utility without reference to aspects of the world which the tool is intended to manage. Those aspects of the world exist: they provide constraints upon the efforts to meet one's goals. Thus the notion of existence is deployed in the very process of assessing the pragmatic advisability of adopting a linguistic framework . . . arguments for eliminating a linguistic framework—e.g. the discourse of demonic possession—turn on considerations about things that exist in the world and relations that obtain among them. (2016, 51)

That is to say, those who adopt a pragmatic approach to conceptual choice can indeed argue that it is more pragmatically useful to talk in terms of mental illness than demonic possession, or in terms of oxygen than phlogiston, or in terms of Mercury than Vulcan. But the natural way of expressing why it is better is simply to say: that is because *demonic possession,*

phlogiston, and Vulcan turned out not to exist. But if that is so, then (the critic might go on) engaging in this kind of world-constrained pragmatic approach to conceptual choice *does require* appeal to facts about what does and does not exist—and accordingly we do after all need to do metaphysics in order to engage in the deflationist's pragmatic approach to conceptual choice.

Whatever the fate of Kraut's Carnap*, however, deflationism of the form I have defended has the resources to avoid this criticism. My view is importantly different from that of Carnap*. For I don't give an expressivist analysis of existence claims—instead, I allow that 'internal' existence claims may be treated as straightforward descriptions and aptly assessed for truth or falsity—by determining whether the application conditions for the relevant term are met, and/or by making trivial arguments from uncontroversial premises. Nonetheless, I have argued (2015) that we can often make sense of the *pragmatic point* of ontologists *uttering* existence claims (which are often obviously true or false) by seeing them as implicitly *negotiating for* whether or how to use certain terms or concepts.

In the examples given above, the deflationist can accept that we have good reason to think that the application conditions for 'demonic possession', 'phlogiston' and 'Vulcan' were not fulfilled, and so have reasons to deny that such things exist. Given these empirical failings, we do indeed have good reason to drop such terms from (positive atomic use in) our vocabulary. So, in cases like these, existence claims may legitimately motivate such moves in conceptual ethics. But such existence claims are *empirically* justified—it requires no epistemically metaphysical work to have reason to deny the existence of demons, phlogiston, or Vulcan. The assumptions that there were cases of demonic possession, samples of phlogiston, or a planet Vulcan were not fail-safe, and were disconfirmed with the relevant theories. And so the deflationist can accept that we oughtn't to employ terms for things that turn out not to exist, and make use of such (non-)existence claims in her work in conceptual ethics without abandoning her goals of demystifying the epistemology of metaphysics, and without appealing to any epistemically metaphysical existence claims.

A deflationist cannot, however, endorse the move of van Inwagen's 'Norma' who is said to reject nominative terms for numbers "because she thinks that there *are* no numbers" (2016, 17). Given the easy approach to ontology, as I have argued elsewhere, the question of whether there are numbers is easily settled by trivial inferences from uncontroversial premises. And so the best sense a deflationist can make of a nominalist like Norma is as pressing for rejecting nominative terms for numbers (while uttering an obvious falsehood)—not as making a suggestion in conceptual ethics *on the basis of* a metaphysical discovery.[9] But rejecting such moves is not a theoretical cost for the deflationist. For, in order to see the methods of conceptual ethics as constrained by function, worldly factors, and 'site constraints', and thus as not merely arbitrary or subjective, we need not accept

that conceptual ethics must also be answerable to purported metaphysical discoveries.

The deflationist can, however, resist moves like Norma's on various grounds. Rejecting the 'number framework' cannot be motivated by the 'fact' that numbers don't exist if this is not a fact. But neither does the deflationist think that *accepting* noun terms for numbers is motivated by a metaphysical discovery that numbers *do* exist. Instead, the deflationist is contented to take a purely pragmatic approach to the question of whether noun terms for numbers should be introduced into our language. If, as Yablo (2005) speculates, introducing such terms brings benefits for us in enabling us to simplify our statements of scientific laws and the like, and provided the rules for introducing such terms are conceptually coherent (don't lead us into contradiction or other difficulties), we may indeed have good pragmatic reason to accept a linguistic framework that includes such terms (without having to worry about spurious 'metaphysical doubts'). And it may be objectively better, more useful to our purposes of developing and stating scientific theories, to adopt a framework that accepts such terms. Moreover, having accepted such terms and introduced them by way of standard rules that permit inferences from 'there are two cups on the table' to 'the number of cups on the table is two', we may be perfectly entitled to conclude that there are numbers.[10] The deflationist has no need to appeal to metaphysical views about whether or not numbers 'really exist' to justify and evaluate these moves in conceptual ethics—and indeed to do so on non-arbitrary (but still non-metaphysical) grounds.

In short, there is no need to require the deflationist's pragmatic approach to conceptual ethics to be responsive to any *epistemically metaphysical* facts in order for it to be constrained, world-responsive, and non-arbitrary in the ways needed. In engaging in pragmatic conceptual choice, we must be responsive to existence questions *made easy*—but not to serious metaphysics. Where there are merely 'ontological' differences between theories ('fail-safe' differences), the deflationist is only too happy to treat the choice among these as merely pragmatic—appropriately sensitive to factors such as expressive power (say, in enabling us to express certain kinds of generalization), ability to enable us to simplify our statements of theories or worldly reports, ability to successfully coordinate our activities, reduce cognitive load, and so on. Thus we can retain our deflationary approach and still employ a pragmatic approach to conceptual choice that is capable of being world-responsive, that escapes the threat of the no-exit problem, and that retains the epistemological high ground over serious metaphysics.

Conclusion

Taking the legitimate, deepest, and most interesting work of metaphysics to be work in conceptual ethics is an appealing position. For it enables us to

account for the felt depth, importance, and worldliness of metaphysics while retaining the epistemological clarity characteristic of deflationism. The threat I have been concerned with here, however, is that conceptual ethics in turn *should* or even *must* appeal to work in serious metaphysics. I have argued, however, that adopting metaphysical methods for conceptual choice is undesirable, as it lands us back in familiar epistemological difficulties—troubles that are not easily eradicated by appeals to analogies between metaphysical theory choice and scientific theory choice, nor by appealing to the ability of metaphysical theses to be confirmed as part of a 'total' scientific theory. I have also argued that deflationists may take a pragmatic approach to conceptual ethics instead, and that in doing so they needn't treat conceptual choices as merely arbitrary or unconstrained. Indeed, as I have argued, we can see them as constrained by *worldly* factors without seeing them as being constrained by *epistemically metaphysical* facts.

If we take the central, deepest work of metaphysics to involve conceptual ethics—conceived pragmatically—we can avoid threats of a rivalry with science, and avoid the skepticism that arises from the proliferation of competing views (which may then be seen as alternative solutions to an engineering problem). Moreover, if we take that route we needn't defend the idea that the theoretic virtues other than empirical adequacy are truth-conducive, nor defend the view that ontological assumptions are confirmed with scientific theories. Given the additional mysteries and burdens that come with taking a metaphysical approach to conceptual ethics, one might wonder what compensating advantages are supposed to be gained by it. Those often appealed to—its ability to avoid arbitrariness and subjectivity and to respect intuitions about structure—I have argued are also to be found in the less problematic pragmatic view. I thus end this paper by leaving to the serious metaphysician the task of showing how the epistemic mysteries are best handled, and what we might hope to gain by resolving them. Until then, the deflationist may rest content with a pragmatic approach to conceptual ethics, and use that as a fitting and still deflationary way of accounting for the difficulty, interest, and importance of much work in metaphysics.

Notes

1. See my (2017) for discussion of these difficulties and arguments that they are relieved by conceiving of the work of metaphysics as centrally involving normative conceptual work.
2. There may be other versions available, too, such as one that would say that we should adopt a conceptual scheme that properly characterizes the *essences* of things in the world.
3. In Kraut's work, the objection is aimed at an expressivist view that takes existence claims to be merely expressions of our commitments to adopting certain linguistic forms. More on this below.

4. Like Paul, Sider accepts that there are differences in degree between using the theoretic virtues in science and metaphysics, "We employ many of the same criteria—whatever those are—for theory choice within metaphysics that we employ outside of metaphysics. Admittedly, those criteria give less clear guidance in metaphysics than elsewhere; but there's no harm in following this argument where it leads: metaphysical inquiry is by its nature comparatively speculative and uncertain." (2011, 12).

5. Nonetheless, Sider of course should not be taken to be a purely naturalistic metaphysician who simply waits on scientific confirmation to confirm metaphysical theories. He also endorses a methodology like Paul's, of taking metaphysical theories to be confirmed *analogously* to scientific theories by way of their possession of theoretic virtues.

6. Yablo goes on to argue that where such presuppositions are fail-safe, ontological questions regarding them are 'moot' in the sense that there is nothing to settle them. I disagree with Yablo about this metaontological conclusion (see my 2014 and his 2014), but nonetheless think that the mechanism of 'subtraction' and identifying the assertive content of statements may be useful for a variety of purposes—perhaps among them distinguishing what aspects of a theory are and are not confirmed by its predictive success.

7. Even if two languages differed in expressive power, so that one could *express* predictions the other could not, that would not be enough to meet Sober's criterion. For the criterion is that the ideological differences must lead the theories to confer *different probabilities on the same predictions*.

8. We needn't take a stand on what view of function to adopt here, though one might (for example) appeal to either a Millikan (1984) style view of proper function, or a Cummins (1975) style view of function as a capacity ascribed as part of the analysis of the capacity of a containing system. In answering functional questions we might address questions such as: Why is it useful to have the relevant term in our vocabulary (or concept in our repertoire)? What role does this concept play (perhaps along with allied terms and concepts) in our overall conceptual system? What we would be missing if we lacked such a term or concept? What did having that concept do for societies that enabled them to carry on and reproduce their conceptual system, including use of the concept at issue?

9. Although Norma is likely to reject this interpretation of what she is doing, as I have argued elsewhere (2016), we can give reasons for thinking that taking serious metaphysicians to be implicitly engaged in pressing for conceptual changes than in reporting on metaphysical discoveries can make better sense of some of their own *practices* involving ways in which they argue for and justify their views.

10. This approach is based on the work of neo-Fregeans such as Hale and Wright (2001, 2009). For arguments against this approach, see Hofweber (2007). For defense and further discussion see my (2015, Chapter 9).

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