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Metaphysics With no Metaphysical Commitment

Constructivist Foundations, 16, 167-171, 2021

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Abstract: I clarify the status of the “quasi-metaphysics” associated with neurophenomenology in the target paper. Here, metaphysics serves as a therapy and as a guide, not as a picture of anything. It aims at liberating us from the urge for secure foundations, rather than providing yet another foundational representation.

1. That an article triggers diametrically opposite reactions from authors who work in different philosophical spheres and research programs may be the best possible mark of its intention. My intention, in the target article, was to establish a bridge between analytic or cognitive metaphysicians, and those (rare) researchers who have followed the path towards what **Urban Kordeš** (in his abstract) calls “bracketing the desire for metaphysical construction.”
2. On the one hand, I find my argument criticized by **Andrea Pace Giannotta**, and **Bryony Pierce**, and, in the first part of his commentary, by **Gregory Nixon**, for balking at defending a full-blown metaphysics, which might then come close to panexperientialism, panqualityism, panabstractism, or some sort of process metaphysics. On the other hand, it is also criticized by **Natalie Depraz** and **Kordeš** for falling into the trap of trying to “provide secure foundations for an otherwise uncertain existential situation” (**Kordeš** §2). These mirror-like criticisms are indirect (and possibly ironical) signs that some sort of bridge has indeed been established. They are signs that some improbable middle path between speculating and being/acting, between looking for foundational pictures and immersing oneself in the flow of inquiring, has indeed been adumbrated. **James Morley** is a different case, for we both seem to be fellow walkers on similar middle paths.

3. I have a preference towards the second group of positions, here represented by **Depraz** and **Kordeš**. This is testified by many of my former papers, including those devoted to the neurophenomenological stance, in this journal (Bitbol 2012, 2017; Bitbol & Antonova 2016), and by my books (e.g., Bitbol 2014). However, in the past I experienced extreme difficulty being understood by the other philosophical side when I adhered scrupulously to a consistent phenomenological position. A wonderful week of continuously vibrant debate with Max Velmans in 2008, at the Ratna Ling Retreat Center in northern California, acted as a revelation of this difficulty, and a decisive challenge to me.

4. During my earlier discussions with cognitive metaphysicians, I could rely on two resources to keep defending a decidedly phenomenological and performative approach to mind and consciousness against any temptation at crystallizing it into a foundational thesis. The first resource was the repeated practice of the *epoché*, that brought me back to a place of quiet unarticulated certainty. The second resource was to elaborate various metaphysical pictures that offered some guidance to philosophical reasonings, yet were not to be taken too seriously. All my metaphysical ladders were thrown away after they had served their purpose.

5. What I propose, in the target article, is to be construed as just one of these metaphysical ladders, say, the most nuanced I could find till now. Thus, in the same way as all the former metaphysical ladders, it is meant to be thrown away at the end of the thought process. It should be relinquished as soon as it is no longer useful as a Wittgensteinian antidote against *genuine* metaphysical positions. Moreover, just as any (Wittgensteinian) medicine, this one should certainly not be swallowed by those who do not need it (**Depraz Q1**).

6. This is probably why I introduced the word “quasi-metaphysics” in the conclusion of the article. “Quasi-metaphysics” echoes the subtle “quasi-realist” approach formulated by Simon Blackburn (1993). A quasi-realist epistemologist tends to act *as though* she accepted realism, i.e., *as if* a certain theory were a faithful representation of any (proclaimed) mind-independent reality. However, unlike a standard anti-realist, she refrains from adding the “as if” clause. For, insisting that a theory works *only as though* it were “true to the world,” would mean that she has a vague idea of what the world might *really* be like (perhaps *dissimilar* to the theory). To that extent, Blackburn’s quasi-realist epistemologist is more consistently anti-realist than an anti-realist. Just like an anti-realist, she accepts that theoretical pictures of the world are purely instrumental, but she does not claim too loudly that they are *not* representational because, according

to her, the standard realist conception of theories as “mirrors of nature” is not just wrong: it is undecidable and therefore nonsensical.

7. My quasi-metaphysics follows an analogous argumentative strategy. Although it imitates to some (small) extent the style of naturalism, it is meant to promote what **Morley** (Q1) advocates as “a mixed-methods approach where naturalism does not dominate.” In other terms, it is only meant to be an instrument and guidance in the methodological mix. Yet it would be pointless to insist too loudly on this point in the target article because, like any medicine, this one works better if one sticks with it for a while.

8. Another (metaphorical) way to express the curative function of metaphysical pictures is to think of the increasing use of “avatars” to stand for agents or speakers in livestream video presentations on the internet, or in video games. In this case, a little puppet character is projected onto screens, to represent the motions, decisions, and even sometimes emotions of a living, striving and dreaming human being, in a virtual space that is accessible to a number of participants. In principle, no one should mistake this puppet character for the human agent or speaker it stands for. Yet, an excessive familiarity with the virtual space in which the puppet character moves may have the consequence of making us seemingly forget that it is just virtual, and of triggering spurious self-identification with our “avatar.”

9. Here, a certain metaphysical picture is used as an “avatar” of the apparently antipodal strategy of pursuing an open-ended epistemological quest in the midst of unfolding embodied experience, while “bracketing metaphysical attitude” (**Kordeš** §9). The said “avatar” is meant to hold a role in the virtual space of conflicting metaphysical systems, intellectual abstractions, and foundational claims, while standing for their very opposite. This way, it can be located and recognized by those who live in the virtual space of abstract ideas and tend to self-identify with a certain definite metaphysical position. My hope is that, as soon as such recognition has occurred, the avatar status of this metaphysical position will be recognized, as well, and that this favors a sudden egression from the “Matrix”-like virtual space of metaphysical constructs. Can we not resort to this skillful means?

10. Such non-committal handling of metaphysical pictures and conceptions was familiar even to the most critical and deconstructive philosophical school in human history, namely the Buddhist *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka*, alluded to by **Pace Giannotta**

(§§1, 11) and **Depraz** (§2), and brilliantly advocated in a contemporary cognitive context by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch (1991).

11. Any metaphysical temptation was mercilessly denounced by Nāgārjuna, the archetypal Madhyamaka thinker. Nāgārjuna chased the metaphysical temptation to its last possible shelter: the very words and concepts of his philosophy. Nāgārjuna thus declared, “*I have no thesis*” (Nāgārjuna 2010, §29). And he insisted that not even “*Śūnyatā*” (his claim that everything is *empty* of own-being) should be mistaken for a thesis. “Emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. Those who are possessed of the view of Emptiness are said to be incorrigible” (Nāgārjuna 1991: Chapter 13, §8). It then turns out that the Madhyamaka concept of “emptiness” cannot be assimilated to a metaphysical “view.” It has no other virtue than therapeutic and evocative. It primarily refers to the mental leveling that a critique of metaphysics is capable of effecting. And it evokes the freshness of a gaze whose conceptual frameworks, and pre-conceptual forms of perception, have been cleared out.

12. Yet, Nāgārjuna also admits the serviceability of what he calls “conventional truths,” besides the silent, non-thetic, “ultimate” lived truth indicated by *Śūnyatā*. Even though it is crucial to distinguish between the latter “two truths” (Nāgārjuna 1991: Chapter 24, §§8–9), their being set apart does not preclude deep connections between them. Indeed, the “ultimate truth” (or, rather, “ultimate insight”) of *Śūnyatā* is eventually equated with the dependent co-arising of relative phenomena (Nāgārjuna 1991, chapter 24, §18; Garfield 1994). And, in the early days of Buddhism, the dependent co-arising of phenomena was itself expressed conventionally in terms of the law of cause and effect. Even though the standard, foundationalist, concept of productive causality was thoroughly criticized by Nāgārjuna (1991, chapter 1, §1), it effectively served as an initial, purely conventional, mode of understanding, out of which the more advanced concept of dependent co-arising, and the ultimate “purgative” (Bugault 1983) concept of emptiness, were progressively extracted. Without the assistance of the early view of the world *qua* tight causal meshwork, to cure us from the alternative view of the world as a collection of semi-isolated and autonomous substances, the path towards the no-view atmosphere of *Śūnyatā* would have been steeper, to say the least.

13. With this example in mind, one can even envisage the possibility of extending the function of metaphysics, as cogently suggested by **Nixon** (§21). Beyond its transient use as a therapy, metaphysics can perhaps promote the continuous transformation of thought and life. It can play a powerful heuristic role for living-beings-in-the-world

(that could also benefit the design of qualitative research **Morley Q2**), while not claiming to provide a picture of the world seen from without. This limited role would be testified by one's willingness to drop metaphysical beliefs, or to change them, when one's research program requires such renouncements.

14. Remember that, according to Varela's dialectic, higher and lower levels of organization are entangled in a virtuous circle (Varela 1976). The connection between entertaining a metaphysical view of oneself in the world, and one's own path of transformation in life, might then operate as a case of such entanglement and such a virtuous circle (**Depraz Q2**).

15. The idea of a quasi-metaphysics, inspired by Blackburn's quasi-realism, will also serve to address **Kordeš**'s reproach of failing to separate ontological from epistemological statements. An illustration of this qualm is afforded by the comparison between my sentence, "there *is* nothing outside present experience, except what can be reconstructed from its memorized, perceptive, imaginative, and intellectual components" (§26, my emphasis), and his alternative sentence that one should just "...humbly observe that there is no epistemically reliable way of *knowing* about what is outside present experience" (§10, my emphasis). Trying to alleviate the import of the verb "to be," and replacing it with the verb "to know" *looks* humbler, but in fact this is more speculative and ambitious. This move resembles the standard strategy of anti-realism, that consists in adding an "as though" clause to any claim about what is real. We have seen that the anti-realist's use of the "as though" clause indicates that she vaguely envisages what the world might *really* be like; and that this makes the anti-realist more realist than the quasi-realist. In the same way, **Kordeš**'s mere allusion to what is outside present experience means he willy-nilly imagines a "world out there" that we could know, but unfortunately have no reliable way to disclose.

16. Beware, at this point. This very adumbration of some "world out there" is performed now, as an act of one's consciousness "in there" (although the distinction between "out there" and "in there" should also be discarded, as the misleading remnant of a standard dualist picture of knowledge that is readily dissolved by the former criticism). This is why it is (surprisingly) humbler and more prudent in these circumstances to use the verb "to be" instead of the verb "to know." Using the verb "to be" in the spirit of quasi-metaphysics does not amount to claiming that present experience *is*, while the world-out-there *is not*. This just means that, when the very distinction between experience and world is suspended, there is no reason to contrast

knowing and being, and therefore no reason to refuse application of the verb “to be” to our only given, i.e., experience-of-a-world.

17. The above development, dropping the contrast between knowing and being, is an opportunity to answer an objection that comes from the other end of the spectrum of philosophical positions. **Pierce** ascribes to me the view that “lived experience, not physical matter, [is] ontologically prior, with physical objects relegated to being constituents of conscious experience” (§1). And she considers this (alleged) thesis of mine as deficient, since “setting aside the presumption of a stable physical external world beyond the realm of lived experience entails a loss of explanatory value” (§5).

18. Here, one must exert care and develop a sense of nuances. Starting from a ready-made dualist scheme of lived experience and physical matter, and then claiming that lived experience is ontologically prior while physical objects are ontologically derivative, would be tantamount to dogmatic idealism. This is not where I am heading. Tacitly endorsing the same dualist scheme and declaring that there is no way of “*knowing* about what is outside present experience,” as **Kordeš** (§10, my emphasis) proposes, looks like the combination of transcendental idealism and empirical (or even transcendent) realism that is usually associated with Kant’s *Transcendental Aesthetics* at the beginning of the *Critique of Pure Reason*¹. This is not what I mean either. What I propose, instead, is to drop the burden of dualism from the outset, thereby making it pointless to decide which one of the two poles of the dualist theory of knowledge is more ontologically loaded than the other. As noted above, what can be said to *be* (in a quasi-ontological, rather than ontological, sense), is what is flatly “given,” i.e., (say) the experience-of-objects, or, with even less determinacy, the appearance-of-something.

19. There then arises a split between the knower and the known out of this non-dual given, by way of a subtle process of subjectivation-objectivation (Natorp 2008). Does this mean that, according to such a conception, physical objects are “relegated to being constituents of conscious experience”? Not exactly. Physical objects are not neatly included within conscious experience. They are given *qua* appearances, but they are simultaneously comprehended as perpetually exceeding what any appearance can encapsulate. In other words, physical objects are presently experienced to be outstripping the present experience “of them.” This is the well-known “transcendence in

¹ Kant (1996)

immanence”² of phenomenology (Patočka 1993: 127), amplified by Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “invisible” (as alluded to by **Nixon** §12). It is almost irresistible to infer from such experience that physical objects *are* indeed transcendent with respect to what is perceived of them. However, one must not forget that this is just an inference, usually an unreflected inference, and that this inference arises in and from the immanence of experience. Quasi-transcendence, pre-reflectively treated as transcendence, but not dogmatically construed as “real” transcendence, is enough for us.

20. Does this position entail “a loss of explanatory value” (**Pierce** §5)? Does it make it impossible to understand crucial features of scientific knowledge such as the law-like behavior of phenomena, or the fact that experimental data sometimes deviate from our expectations? By no means, provided we consider that laws are proposed by our understanding (as Kant would have it), that the discrepancies that may arise between our proposed laws and our experimental findings are detected *qua* experiences, and that they are therefore another case of “transcendence in immanence.”

21. This should also answer **Pierce**’s (Q2) concern about the risk of falling into solipsism. Declaring that “there is nothing outside present experience” (§26 of the target article) does not mean that I am trying desperately to encapsulate the world within the boundaries of my finitude, and even less that I consider that my finite understanding is able to prevent any surprise. This just means that even the unexpected, even what in my fellow humans is in perpetual excess with respect to what I can anticipate of them, is *de facto* given as a possibility of present experience, as a gaping openness of present experience (see **Nixon** §12).

22. In addition (**Kordeš** §4), this view of knowledge as an alternation of expectations and perceptions within a present lived experience has proved its strong clarifying power in the recent interpretation of quantum mechanics called QBism³ (an abbreviation for Quantum Bayesianism) (Bitbol 2020). QBism, according to which the symbols of quantum mechanics encode nothing else and nothing more than “a calculus for gambling *on each agent’s own experience*” (Fuchs 2010: 7, my emphasis), is indeed

² “Immanence” refers to a self-contained domain (such as lived experience), which is exceeded by nothing, which has no “beyond” itself. “Transcendence” evokes something utterly beyond what is immediately given. The expression “transcendence in immanence” then sounds like an oxymoron. However, it involves no contradiction, provided it is understood as a very strong statement of immanence, according to which even the irresistible feeling or belief that there is something beyond experience arises from certain features of experience itself (such as its openness to future surprises).

³ See the interview “A private view of quantum mechanics” with Christopher Fuchs in Quanta Magazine, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/quantum-bayesianism-explained-by-its-founder-20150604>

able to dissolve immediately the well-known Schrödinger's cat "paradox" and many other similar problems. So, far from entailing a loss in explanatory value in physical science, a careful evaluation of the roots of knowledge in lived experience proves to be a crucial resource for dispelling many of the so-called "mysteries" of quantum physics.

23. Nor do the concepts of flesh and embodiment contradict the methodological bias in favor of lived experience, contrary to what **Pierce** (Q1) suggests. While I agree that the words "body" and "flesh" are primarily loaded with their objectivist meaning, they are also leaning against a lived experience of *cenesthesia*.⁴ "Body" is a two-tier concept, combining a perceived with a self-felt aspect, and also a felt-seen quality with a feeling-seeing ability. These two *experiential* aspects were called respectively "Körper" and "Leib" by Edmund Husserl, or "corps-objet" and "corps-propre" by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. And they were dynamically articulated through the "chiasm" by Merleau-Ponty (**Nixon** §10, §14).

24. However, can we not try to find another radically alternative kind of metaphysics that would fit effortlessly with neurophenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's intra-ontology *qua* dynamical "creative discover[ies]" (**Nixon** Q2)? That this is not impossible is suggested by **Depraz** (Q3), drawing my attention to Jean Wahl's experiential metaphysics of becoming. Among other alternative approaches, Wahl's has a lot to offer. For, according to Wahl, the most credible definition of a metaphysical issue is that "it is an issue that involves ourselves as well as the world" (Wahl 1965: 12).⁵ Wahl's metaphysics is especially illuminating when it elaborates a dialectic of becoming and permanence that probes into the existential origin of the conventional distinction between mind and body. According to Wahl, "becoming is everything, but it triggers its opposite: the thought of permanence" (Ricoeur 1957: 530, my translation). This thought of permanence works as an operator of "*reduction*," i.e., of selection of a few invariant features within the continuum of becoming. Operating such a reduction after a patient quest for permanence, is what natural sciences do, but the said reduction leaves an irreducible "residue" behind, which is called "quality" by Wahl. The permanent features selected within the flow of becoming are usually construed as a set

⁴ "Cenesthesia" is the vague global inner feeling we have of our existence *qua* extended in space, usually endowed with a quality of well-being or unease (Starobinski 1977).

⁵ This is Wahl's (unfortunately dualist) formulation of an idea presented in a tighter form by Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty: that a metaphysical question is one in which the one who questions is at stake in the question. See, e.g., Merleau-Ponty (1964: 47).

of bodily objects, together with their laws of motion, whereas the residual quality is usually ascribed to some “mental” domain. Thus arises the famous (or infamous) duality between body and mind.

25. Another commendable alternative conception of metaphysics is that of Henri Bergson. According to him, since reason has been disqualified by Kant as a reliable faculty for elaborating a metaphysics, one must use *intuition* instead. For intuition is capable of reaching the essence of things *from within*, by participation and empathy with what is to be elucidated (Bergson 2013). Neurophenomenology, which combines inquiry about direct (intuitive) access to experience and the “high-flying thought” of objective neuroscience, may have some affinities with this non-conventional metaphysical approach.

26. Here again, however, one should not mistake a metaphysics that posits a verbally objectified trace of experience (the words “quality,” “becoming,” “intuition,” “neutral monistic domain” or the Whiteheadian “momentary occasion”), for a fully developed experiential research program (**Nixon Q1**). This is why I acknowledge the relevance of **Kordeš’s** and **Depraz’s** appeal to embed the philosophical quest into an ongoing research practice. Micro-phenomenology, as a second-person method for promoting the verbalization of lived moments of experience, is indeed a key method in this respect (Petitmengin et al. 2019). It is both an integral part of Varela’s “methodological remedy” to the “hard problem of consciousness,” and a formidable advance towards an anchoring of phenomenology in singular experiences, against its too widespread “a priorist,” or intellectualist, misinterpretations.

27. It is striking that the first name given to the micro-phenomenological inquiry was “explicitation” (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch 2003). “Explicitation,” a noun derived from the French verb “expliciter” (“to make explicit”), can be understood in two ways. It first refers to the process of putting into (hesitantly but carefully) selected words an episode of silently lived experience, thus making verbally explicit what was implicit in transient feelings. However, “explicitation” can also refer to the (possibly silent) systematic exploration of all the aspects of a *type* of experience, thus unraveling its neglected connections. This is what I mean, in the target article, when I ascribe to Merleau-Ponty an alternative conception of the “explanation” of neuro-experiential correlation, which should rather be called “expounding” or “unfolding.” Yet I entirely agree with **Depraz** (Q3), pointing out that, instead of trying to stretch the meaning of the verb “to explain,” one should rather rely on Husserl’s distinction between *erklären* (to explain) and *aufklären* (to make explicit).

28. To conclude on a positive note, I would like to insist on a latent point of convergence of several participants in this discussion. We more or less agree on raising the following question: how to know and how to be, when we inextricably partake of what we want to inquire upon (e.g., **Nixon** §19, **Morley** §7)? This is an age-old issue, but in the past, it was understood only by a few visionary thinkers, and identified by them as an obstacle. At the birth of classical physics, Blaise Pascal thus complained that human beings must content themselves with perceiving “the appearance of the middle of things, in an eternal despair of knowing either their beginning or their end.” (Pascal 1910: 28). Recognizing (in the wake of Merleau-Ponty) that we are not only in the “middle of things,” but that we and things are so entangled that *the separation is simultaneously a joining* (**Morley** §7), is probably the most promising and universal avenue of research of the twenty-first century. It may coalesce the efforts of physicists, cognitive scientists, biologists, phenomenologists, contemplative practitioners, and even metaphysicians. In particular, it may join ecology in common recognition that we and our environment are deeply intertwined so as to transform and define one another. We are then arriving at the insight that ecology is not just one object of scientific knowledge among many others, but rather the necessary foundation of any knowledge whatsoever. At this point, Pascal’s “eternal despair” of knowing the ultimate origin of what there is can be transformed into a motivation for an “applied practice” (**Morley** Q3) originating from the innermost of what there is.

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