



On the Relationship of Metaphysics to Transdisciplinarity

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doi: 10.22545/2013/00040

This essay shows the parallels between metaphysics and transdisciplinarity, both in terms of their aims and methods and in terms of their place or role in academic institutions. It attempts to define metaphysics, addresses criticisms of metaphysics, and indicates the necessary relationship of metaphysics to transdisciplinary endeavors.

Keywords: metaphysics, philosophy, method, transdisciplinarity, hermeneutics, deconstruction.

1 Introduction

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle recognizes that “each person judges rightly what he knows, and is a good judge about that; hence the good judge in a given area is the person educated in that area.” No more succinct statement can be given as the basis for our traditional disciplinary way of thinking, researching, and educating. This insight is no more than common sense. But Aristotle follows this reasonable thought by claiming that “the unqualifiedly good judge is the person educated in every area,” [1]. If the requirement for being an “unqualifiedly good judge” is that one be “educated in every area,” then the most reasonable conclusion to be drawn from this is that there are no unqualifiedly good judges. If this is so, then disciplinary thinking—its methods and procedures, its practices, authorizations, and certifications—are all we are reasonably entitled

to. For who could possibly be “educated in every area”? It is no longer possible—if indeed it ever really were—to be a Renaissance person, engaged in the widest possible array of scientific, philosophical, and cultural pursuits. In our age of analysis and specialization, one who posed as such could be seen as no more than a dabbler. Perhaps only an Aristotle, who wrote on physics, logic, rhetoric, ethics, zoology, meteorology, poetics, politics, and so on, could make such a claim, but it seems far too late in the scientific and cultural evolution of humanity for us to expect another Aristotle to arrive on the scene.

But just exactly what did Aristotle mean by this insight that Terrence Irwin translates as being “educated in every area”? Did Aristotle mean by this that one would need to have developed “expertise” in every area, that (in today’s terms) one would have to major in every subject, earn PhD’s in every field, in order to be the “unqualifiedly good judge”? And what does that latter phrase really signify? The word translated by “unqualifiedly” means “as such,” a good judge *as such*, without regard to any particular field or fields of expertise. It would not intend one who is qualified (certified) as a competent judge in some specific field rather than another, but one who is competent to judge *per se*.

Let me note that if there were no such persons, the prospects for transdisciplinarity are dim. But could there be such persons? The key to answering this question lies in our interpretation of the requirement

to be “educated in every area.” The Greek words do not reference “areas” (or fields or disciplines). They say that one must be educated “about all” The *all* is not qualified, not referred to as the *all* insofar as it is considered as this rather than that. Is there a way of approaching the *all*, of grasping the *all* in this unqualified sense, of coming to the all as such? In other words, how can we know the *all* as the whole as such in addition to knowing the parts?

2 What is Transdisciplinarity?

Basarab Nicolescu has provided us with a brief and useful history of the application of the term “transdisciplinarity,” [2]. He traces its earliest appearances in the work of Jean Piaget, Erich Jantsch, and André Lichnerowicz. In a critical synthesis of their various understandings of transdisciplinarity, Nicolescu summarizes the intent of transdisciplinarity by keeping close to the meanings of the Latin prefix, *trans*: across, between, and beyond. The transdisciplinary way of understanding rests on the traditional and newly developing disciplines or regions of research and knowledge generation. It cannot mean simply to overcome or leave behind the power and productivity of disciplinary practices. Further, transdisciplinarity recognizes the fecund interplay between disciplines, which often-times leads to the conception and development of new disciplines with new research projects.

But transdisciplinarity envisions more. What is this “more”? What does “beyond” mean in terms of transdisciplinarity? Before attempting to answer this question, let us first note the motive for this desire for something “more.” In an earlier essay, I wrote:

The economic, moral, political, environmental, technical, intellectual, scientific, and even spiritual challenges we face demand approaches that are suitably rich in resources for tackling them. We need to learn how to take the full measure of our knowledge, to find out what it is we really know, now that we know so many disciplinarily distinct things. We need to find a way of recapturing a vision of the “forest” and not just the “trees.” The negative consequences for failing to do so are obvious. Our disciplinary practices inevitably give rise to the fragmentation of knowl-

edge. This fragmentation of knowledge leads to the fragmentation of the university, which has a significant impact on its mission to educate the next generation. The fragmented university leads—consciously or unconsciously—to training students (and faculty, too) to compartmentalize their thinking, their reality, and hence their lives. Our situation demands we respond to the “transdisciplinary imperative,” an approach to research and teaching that would serve to mitigate the consequences of this fragmentation [3].

What I call the “transdisciplinary imperative” stems from our concrete reality, our present situation in which the traditional policing of knowledge and education hamstring us in our struggle to solve pressing real-world problems. We have found that a generalized fragmentation in ourselves, our communities, our institutional practices, and our world at large—a fragmentation resulting in a significant way from philosophical commitments—is no longer acceptable, that the gains we have made via our analytic prowess have come at a cost of debilitating fragmentation that needs to be addressed with alternative concepts and practices. Our sense of the root of the problems points to the fact that we will need “more” than our disciplinary practices and the institutions that support them if we are to have hope for a better future. We must not only continue our discipline-based research and not only look for fruitful cross-disciplinary initiatives; we must also look beyond disciplinary ways of encountering and appropriating reality, which may include moving beyond the institutional embodiments of disciplinary practices in order to cope with complex problems.

But Nicolescu is right, in distinguishing his views from those of, for instance, Michael Gibbons and Helga Nowotny, to say that transdisciplinarity and the “beyond” that it seeks are not solely about solving the problems that confront us—as important as those efforts are [4]. There is more to the “more” than that; the transdisciplinary imperative goes beyond that, important as that is.

It is in this that I would like to tie transdisciplinarity to metaphysics. I will not argue (in this essay, anyway) that those working in a transdisciplinary mode need be committed to any particular metaphysical position or system. Rather I want to argue against any attempt to avoid metaphysics or

downplay its ultimate importance for getting to the *more*, for getting at the *all*. In short, I want to tie the transdisciplinary imperative to a metaphysical imperative (an imperative to metaphysics). Metaphysics pursues the “more” that transdisciplinarity demands, and it is in this that they are allied.

3 What is Metaphysics?

What is metaphysics? The answer depends on who is doing the defining. The term metaphysics has had many meanings over the course of the history of Western philosophy, and any two philosophers can run into all sorts of insoluble problems if they happen to start with two different notions of what metaphysics is. Blackwell’s *A Companion to Metaphysics*, edited by the eminent philosophers Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa, begins its entry on “metaphysics: definitions and divisions” (which you’d think would be pivotal) as follows: “There is no clear and generally accepted definition of metaphysics, no agreement on its tasks, scope or divisions” [5]. If that’s right (and it is), then whatever I am about to say about metaphysics is likely to be arguable if not thoroughly controversial. I can do no more in this essay than to point to some of the key points or elements of metaphysics and must leave so much that would need to be said unsaid. Again, this essay is meant to suggest the broad outlines or at least the motives of what might be considered a research project at the service of a deeper understanding of transdisciplinarity.

It would pay us to recall the origin of the term “metaphysics.” Aristotle, who gave us our start in so many disciplinary practices, inaugurated (from within a long-standing context, of course, dating to the Presocratics) the field of physics. The *Physics* launched a project that is still with us today, namely, to explain things in terms of their causes. In essence, that is what we still attempt to do today in physics. Aristotle discovered in the course of this pursuit that it seemed that one could not fully understand anything unless one traced the chain of causality back to the beginning (*arché*, *principio*), to what must be, to that which, though the cause of all else, has no cause itself. But to speak of such things required a new language, a new *method*. One cannot “explain things in terms of their causes” (physics) if they have no causes. Thus a book appeared in Aristotle’s name that addressed such things as the *arché*, the beginnings, the first things, the necessary

things, the unmoved mover and uncaused causer, etc. This book has come down to us through the ages bearing the title, *Metaphysics*. Aristotle did not, himself, name this book this way, nor does the book contain the term “metaphysics.” Were Aristotle to describe what he was doing in that work, he would say that he was pursuing either “first philosophy” or “theology.” It was “first” philosophy not in the sense that one needs to know about this particular subject matter prior to exploring, say, physics or biology (i.e., natural philosophy), but only that it was an exploration of the first things (*arché*) that were operative whether anyone recognized them or not. As John Stuart Mill (no metaphysician himself) would put it much later,

The truths which are ultimately accepted as the first principles of a science, are really the last results of metaphysical analysis, practised on the elementary notions with which the science is conversant; and their relation to the science is not that of foundations to an edifice, but of roots to a tree, which may perform their office equally well though they be never dug down to and exposed to light [6].

Aristotle would also call his project “theological” not in any religious sense of the term but in the sense that in order to fully understand anything (and everything, *all*) one must make reference to a Prime Mover, an uncaused causer. Reason seems to demand it. Again, physics is not competent to address such questions according to its own method. Something *more* is needed.

But it was not until at least a century after Aristotle’s death when an editor or librarian, Andronicus of Rhodes, tried to catalogue this work that the name *Metaphysics* was applied. The term simply signified the set of books that comes “after the *Physics* books”—*ta meta ta physika*. Something should be said about this word/prefix, *meta*. In time, as we shall see, thinkers came to confuse a cataloging position of the text with the subject matter of the work, coming to see the focus of metaphysics as that which is “beyond the physical.” *Meta* can mean not only “after” but “beyond.” However, the word *meta* can also signify, according to Liddell and Scott, “in the midst of” or “between”, [7]. We can start to see, then, that the Greek prefix *meta-* bears a family resemblance to the Latin prefix *trans-*. Both terms convey

beyond, in the midst of, between, across, through. The term “method” itself, to which we have referred, derives from the Greek *meta-* and *hodos*, meaning *in the midst of a certain way*. There is a relation (and tension) between metaphysics and method and between transdisciplinarity and method. Further, we should note that the disciplines derive from the nature (*physis*) of things themselves. The tension is felt in the fact that we cannot get beyond things to “things” beyond (unnatural natures?) nor can we simply leave disciplinary methods behind (as we attempt to go beyond disciplinarity?), and yet both metaphysics and transdisciplinarity demand *more*. We will return to the discussion of the interweaving of metaphysics and transdisciplinarity.

But first we must continue our discussion of metaphysics itself. Classically, metaphysics is defined as the study of being *qua* being, i.e., the exploration of being or existence just insofar as it is being/existence at all. We could think of this as the most “general” or “abstract” science (defined as any organized body of knowledge). It is not the study of this or that type of being—that’s what we do in the natural and social sciences. For instance, we study living beings in biology; we study material beings in physics; we study vegetative beings in botany. But we study any kind of being—animal, vegetable, mineral, or even abstract beings—in metaphysics. This view sees metaphysics as abstracting from any given object only what pertains to its being at all, to the fact that it is. I might suggest that metaphysics is, in fact, the most concrete (if concrete is taken as the opposite of abstract) in the sense that nothing particular or idiosyncratic is abstracted from being to be focused upon. In other words, metaphysics does not abstract from being as a *whole* in order to focus on, say, the kind of thing a thing is (i.e., a thing’s particular *form*). Being is what all beings have in common and does not distinguish between types of being. In any event, we could say that in any science, we’re looking for patterns, that which stays the “same” in all the various instances of any type of thing. So, for instance, in psychology, we study the pattern of human mental and emotional behavior. Any reference to particular persons and their particular behaviors are meant only to illustrate or give an example of some general pattern (say, aggression, shame, etc.). Metaphysics, in some way, tries to find the pattern of patterns. To put it in Platonic terms, it attempts to understand the “forminess” of forms. Classically,

metaphysics asks: What does it take to be a thing of any kind at all? (Note here that there is a presumption in this definition that reality is a field of things but that this is, in fact, a questionable assumption.)

This basic understanding of the metaphysical endeavor would be shared, more or less, by Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas. To get an in-depth understanding of what metaphysics is all about, we’d have to elaborate all the differences between these thinkers. We’d also have to trace the history of metaphysics into our present day. Were we to do that, we’d find that there are in fact various meanings for the term, metaphysics. Some thinkers discern a difference, for example, between “being” and “existence.” Some equate “metaphysics” with “ontology,” which term comes from the Greek words *ontos* (entity, “thing”) and, of course, *logos* (meaning “study of...,” but of course signifying much more than that). Some thinkers think metaphysics includes but is a wider term than ontology. Some see the job of ontology as to elaborate all the various types or kinds of things there are (this is the understanding of “ontology” that is used in computer science, database design, artificial intelligence, etc.). Philosophers who see it this way think that “metaphysics” (as its name might suggest) is supposed to be about “things” that are somehow *beyond* the physical (or at least beyond “thingness”). Opinion about whether there are such things is, of course, divided.

By *metaphysics* I mean an attempt to articulate the basic or fundamental structure of reality, the way, at base, things are. The classical definition of metaphysics is the study of being *qua* being, the study of things (*any* thing, broadly construed) in terms of the fact that it *is* at all and without regard to the type or kind of thing the thing is.

So is being, then, on this reading a univocal term or is it analogical? Is the being of any given being the “same” as the being of any other being? Or are there “manifold senses of being,” [8].

The fact that we can formulate this as a question points to the fact that, historically, there has been confusion in the pursuit of metaphysics. One way to try to lessen this confusion is to distinguish and define a set of terms that sometimes are used interchangeably. Those terms are *being*, *existence*, and *reality*.

First of all, the word “being” can be thought of in a couple of different ways. We can “hear” it as a noun (a gerund). As in: “a cat is a being.” In this sense,

being = thing. But we can also “hear” it as a verb, a present participle, as a word signifying ongoing activity or action. As in: “the cat was being patient while waiting for his dinner.” There are plenty of other examples of taking a verb (action/activity) and making it into a noun (thing). For instance,

“Joe is skating.” (verb)
“Skating is something Joe likes to do.”
(noun)

Martin Heidegger focused his attention, first of all, on the question of being, noting the ontological difference between beings and Being. A being (noun, an entity) ought not to be confused with its Being (verb). Or, better, Being ought not to be thought to be a being (or entity). This would amount to what Heidegger called “ontotheology,” the confusion of a “what” with a “way.” A being or entity is a thing or an object. Things are thought to have essences or that which makes them to be what they fundamentally are. St. Thomas Aquinas could be accused of “ontotheology” in his claim that God’s essence is existence, which term here is meant to be synonymous with being.

But can we distinguish being from existence? Some philosophers have argued that while all real things *are* (i.e., “have” being) only some *exist*. On this view, exist means literally to “stand out.” Stand out from what? Being. So a rock, for instance, “has” being and a human “has” being [to explain these “scarequotes,” note that *being* is not a predicate (Kant) and is not something a thing could have or not have; if something is a thing it “has” being; there could not be a thing that then acquires being or which could lose being and remain a thing]. But only the human exists, stands out from and over against being—even its own being—and must take a stance towards being. As Heidegger would put it, human being (*Dasein*) is the being whose being it is to be a question to itself [9]. In fact, Heidegger prefers the term *Dasein* over “human” and takes a critical stance towards “humanism” just because even “human” is a question and a project, as can be seen in his quarrel with Sartre [10, 11].

Thus *Dasein* or “existence” in this conception is a sort of being, a particular kind of *what*. We might say that the particular kind of *what* is a *who*, in other words, *Dasein* or existence is or is the basis of personal being. But then not all being (verbal) is univocal in that the way of being of a rock is not

the way of being of a human. Both ways entail that the different types of being in question here *are*, but they *are* not in the same way. Being (verbal) must be an analogical term rather than an univocal term.

In any event, the point here is to note that reality/being/existence is the focus of metaphysics, that reality/being/existence has a richness or essential diversity to it, and that thus there are what have been called “levels of reality” that must be recognized in any metaphysics. This insight militates against any reductionistic view or “levelling” of reality/being/existence. And if that which metaphysics pursues is that which serves as roots of the various sciences and their disciplinary practices, then there is *prima facie* evidence for seeking the “more” of transdisciplinarity.

But there have been objections to the very project and prospects of metaphysics.

4 Objections to Metaphysics

The fundamental questioning of the possibility and validity of metaphysics can be traced to the “epistemological turn” inaugurated by Descartes. From Thales until Descartes, philosophy was grounded in the metaphysical questions of what there is *really* and why. Philosophy, at bottom, was metaphysics. But with Descartes, the fundamental question changed from “What is there?” to “What can I know with certainty?” Philosophy became epistemology. At first, this was a matter of emphasis. Descartes applied his radical methodological doubt to the various *sources* of knowledge to see if anything could withstand withering skepticism. He found that the *I*, the ego, the thinking thing that he himself is, proved indubitable, and further that the nature of the experienceable “world” was such that it gave itself as extension, as extended things consisting of parts outside of parts. With a proof of a good God acting as a basic guarantee against radical skepticism (while still allowing for the errors of finite minds), Descartes could rebuild the edifice of knowledge based on these two substances: thought (*res cogitans*) and extension (*res extensa*).

The question arises, though, concerning the meaning of “substance” with which Descartes was operating. For it had changed. The ancient and medieval thinkers understood substance as that which was apt to exist *in* itself and not as an intrinsic part of another. On this view, there were many substances,

many real things, each with its own *eidos*, its own form or idea, and its own *telos*, its own aim, goal, or purpose according to its kind. But for various philosophical reasons (and theological interests), the definition of substance changed. The definition with which Descartes was working held that substance is that which is apt to exist *by* itself, i.e., that which needs nothing other than itself in order to exist. Clearly, on this definition most (and perhaps all) of the substances (substantial beings) recognized by ancient and medieval philosophers would no longer qualify. Whereas previously both ships and sailors would count as substances (i.e., as *real* things), neither would count any longer. Ships need something other than themselves in order to exist (shipbuilders, trees, etc.), as do human beings (parents, air, water, food, etc.). These could no longer be considered the *real* constituents of reality.

But *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, as Descartes saw them, were genuine substances, the *real* things constitutive of reality. Thinking substance needs nothing other than itself in order to exist. The famous hypothesis of the “Evil Demon (or Genius)” – that legendary thought-experiment – demonstrated that even an all-powerful malevolent force is incapable of shaking the certainty of the existence of the *I* as a thinking thing. This is the conclusion of the famous argument: “I think; therefore, I am.” But I am...what? *Only* a “thinking thing.” The “Evil Demon” could be making me think I am an American citizen, philosophy professor, husband and father, but all of that might well be an illusion. The “Evil Demon” might even lead me to believe that I need a brain in order to think, but of this we have no absolute certainty. But I cannot be misled about my existence – no matter what the “Evil Demon” may try – so long as I am doubting, which is a mode of thinking. So this thinking needs nothing other than itself in order to exist. And when I experience, say, this coffee cup, the “cause” of the experience may be that there is a coffee cup in front of me, or that I am remembering a coffee cup, or that I am imagining a coffee cup, or that I am hallucinating a coffee cup, or that the “Evil Demon” is making me have this experience of a coffee cup. But no matter what the cause (if any), I cannot be having an experience of this coffee cup unless it comes in the “way” of extension, of parts outside of parts, or to put it another way, if it were not to have “dimensionality.” It is not possible to have any experience of a coffee

cup without it having a top, bottom, left, and right, and for some duration. Otherwise, it is not experience of a coffee cup (or anything else) at all. Thus extension, extended substance (*res extensa*), needs nothing other than itself in order to exist.

This is Cartesian dualism, the idea that there are just two substances (plus God, of course): thought and extension. This leads to the intractable mind-body problem, viz., the question of how immaterial and thus un-limited mind can influence or operate on material, finite bodies. It views the human being as fundamentally *thought* (consciousness, mind, or soul) that *has* a body. It is a metaphysical schizophrenia, a condition brought on by an epistemological anxiety: the need for certainty (defined in a particular way based on particular assumptions). For Descartes had clearly not abandoned metaphysics – after all, his most important work is entitled, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), “first philosophy” as we saw being Aristotle’s designation for what he was after in the work known to us (but not to him) as the *Metaphysics*. Rather, metaphysics was transformed due to a change in a metaphysical point of view regarding substance coupled with a drive for a rigorous epistemology based on particular premises.

The aftermath of Cartesian dualism is well-known. Descartes’ methodological skepticism is applied to his own project, the result being Humean skepticism and empiricism (a philosophical view that claims to eschew metaphysical speculation). Kant, in his horror at the implications for science, morals, and religion of this radical skepticism, developed his critical philosophy to try to have things both ways. A Kantian “critique” purports to show both *limits* and the *conditions of possibility* of its subject matter. For instance, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787) shows both the conditions of possibility of experience (which was meant to be the foundation of knowledge for the empiricists) and the limits of reason in terms of its drive to have metaphysical knowledge. Those limits are severe. According to traditional metaphysics, “cause,” “soul,” and “God,” were thought to be realities about which we can have knowledge. Hume’s empiricism rejected the possibility (How can one possibly experience a “cause” or a “soul” or “God”?). Kant accepted that “cause,” “soul” and “God” (along with time and space) are not “out there” in the world waiting to be experienced; rather, he ingeniously placed them all in the structure of reason as constituting the conditions

of possibility of experience anything at all (transcendental subjectivity). We cannot have knowledge of these—knowledge can come only from experience, and these are impossible to experience. Rather, they make experience itself possible and so make possible what knowledge we might have. Metaphysical speculation, however, transgresses the limits of reason by positing as objects for experience that which is a formal and constitutive structure of transcendental subjectivity.

This Kantian critique has been at the base of all subsequent criticisms and rejections of metaphysics, through positivism, scientism, phenomenology, and deconstruction. The problems many philosophers see for metaphysics are as follows:

1. Metaphysics, as its name implies, attempts to investigate that which is “beyond physics.” As there are no such things, metaphysics has no subject matter and is empty.
2. Metaphysics claims that there are things such as “causes” and “God,” but such things cannot be experienced in any verifiable way.
3. The claims of metaphysics are such that one could both prove and disprove the same claim, leading to antinomies, confusions, nonsense.
4. There is no way to ultimately justify the principial (may I use this locution as the adverbial of principle?) or foundational claims of metaphysics; therefore, these principial claims are matters of choice, putting metaphysics on the same footing as aesthetics (which has diminished status in the aftermath of Cartesian dualism).
5. The natural (and social) sciences are perfectly able to carry on their business without reference to metaphysical claims. Therefore, the legitimacy and justification of our knowledge have “no need of such hypotheses” as metaphysics alleges to provide. Metaphysics, in this sense, is akin to religious claims.
6. Metaphysics attempts to define or delimit essences as if these were timeless and unchanging. Metaphysics privileges the timeless and unchanging over the temporal and changing as the perfect over the imperfect, as the truth over opinion. Metaphysics is about stasis. But all is

flux. All things are the effects and the flow of evolutionary processes. There are no timeless essences. The pretensions of metaphysics are false.

7. But not only false. When it comes to delineating the metaphysics of human persons, metaphysics is also dangerous. It is behind the notion of set natures of things, leading to claims of natural law. A division is made between that which is natural (appropriate to a particular nature) and that which is unnatural. This thinking has been the basis of all racism, sexism, nationalism, speciesism, etc. Metaphysics is ethically and politically abhorrent.

5 A Response to the Charges Against Metaphysics

Quite a bill of particulars!

Again, philosophers agree that “metaphysics” is a tough word to define and yet everyone carries around some kind of working definition of it in their heads, including those who deny the possibility, plausibility, or desirability of metaphysics. So let’s just start with some of those working definitions, indeed, let’s just combine them. Metaphysics studies being/existence/reality as such; metaphysics studies that which must be; metaphysics studies that which does not change; metaphysics studies the first causes/principles of things. Being/existence/reality; that which must be; that which does not change; first causes/principles: Are these, themselves, *things*, things like other things? And are there such “things” (if they are, in fact, things)? And what are these like? If you address yourself to these question, you are engaged in metaphysics. The way to not be engaged in metaphysics is to not be engaged with these and allied questions. However, it seems plain to me that whatever philosophical questions you choose to engage with in lieu of these sorts questions will in fact lend themselves to raising these sorts of questions anyway. So that means we cannot fully and finally escape metaphysics. We can only shift from one more or less consciously held, more or less richly detailed metaphysical position to another. There is no “end of metaphysics,” in the sense of “cessation,” short of death. But what is the “end of metaphysics” in the sense of its *telos*, its aim, goal, or purpose? As already mentioned, the end of metaphysics is

to explore being/existence/reality; the immutable; the necessary; and first causes/principles. But is there more to the aim of metaphysics? That is the question, more than any other, I think, that leads to opposition to metaphysics. In other words, the opposition is not to metaphysics *per se* (it is, in my view, un-opposable in that sense); rather, the opposition is to its purported aims, to what it wants to say or tries to do beyond the formal (let's call them) aims of metaphysics just mentioned. Another way to put this would be to point out that there can be no absolute opposition to metaphysics, but only opportunities to point out problems and make trouble for the metaphysical endeavor undertaken for this or that particular aim.

Does this imply, then, that there are some legitimate or acceptable or benign aims for metaphysics but also some illegitimate, unacceptable, or dangerous aims as well? And, if so, is it possible to determine whether a given aim falls into one category or the other?

I would want to answer in the affirmative. But to do so, I'd have to get back to something Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno insisted upon: that philosophy (which is metaphysics) is "owned," so to speak, by the person of flesh and blood. It is that person who determines the character of metaphysics (not the formal aims, of course). Would this leave metaphysics in a position that is hopelessly subjective, perspectival, and relativistic? I would say, first, it depends on what you mean by "hopeless." And, second, I would point out that "subjective" is, itself, a metaphysical determination, a determination that might, itself, prove unacceptable or even dangerous, as compared to other metaphysical determinations one might adopt.

Let us review the objections to metaphysics noted above. One, it seems to me, rests on an unexamined presupposition, that what there is are things, and that metaphysics deals with a particular class of things ("existence" as a supreme thing, necessary and immutable; forms-as-things; causes-as-things, etc.); and that, in fact, there are no such things, and so metaphysics is talking about nothing, i.e., it is nonsense. That is one criticism of metaphysics that starts with Kant and is continued by modern empiricism, positivism, scientism, phenomenology, and deconstruction. But, as I said, this all rests on the assumption that metaphysics addresses itself to certain kinds of things. Second, an objection to

metaphysics rests on the claim that we cannot really ever know that about which we speak and write while engaged in metaphysics, that one could write up a marvelously sophisticated, intricate, ingenious metaphysical system that is based, at bottom, on the will and imagination of the philosopher himself. Such systems have no real connection to reality, or no more connection than competing systems. Hegelianism, Thomism, Bergsonism, Whiteheadianism, etc., are all fine intellectual constructions that one could dabble with, but one system is as good as another because none touches reality in a real way (it is claimed). In short, there is no epistemological legitimation for metaphysics. This complaint, of course, rests on the unexamined assumption that epistemology is primary and, in its foundations at least, problem-free. This is highly debatable. This complaint stems from Cartesian thought which lost no time in transforming itself into radical skepticism. This complaint further assumes that it counts against metaphysics that there are many plausible (or should we say equally implausible, on the critics' terms?) metaphysical positions, as if the multiplicity itself militates against metaphysics, instead of, for instance, pointing to something arising archaically/principially, necessarily, and unchangeably from being/existence/reality. Now I think that in both these objections there is a problem the critics have with the non-formal ends of metaphysics. That is, I think the objectors think the metaphysician wants to have something she is not entitled to (in their minds). The metaphysician has an aim in mind, which is to know something true about the whole, which the critics say she ought to forswear. She ought not to want what she wants. But want it she does.

The other complaints against metaphysics follow from this last point. The critics seem to infer the *raison* the metaphysician wants what he wants, which is to know something true about the whole. They seem to think that this knowledge would give some sort of power and that the power is insidious and it would be used for nefarious purposes. This is not a wholly unfair complaint, by the way. Historically, there have been numerous cases that would count as evidence in the critics' favor. For instance, metaphysicians want to know something true about human beings as a whole, and when they believe they have discovered this universal truth about humans and then articulate that truth, that truth hardens into a doctrine or an ideology that can be used po-

litically to serve certain interests rather than others. So once you have discovered human being's timeless, unchanging nature, then any actual human being who does not fit neatly into that particular articulation of human nature becomes something other and therefore less than human (*other* seems to be always *less*). Racism, sexism, nationalism, speciesism, ableism, and on and on, all rest on what critics call a metaphysical assumption rather than a metaphysical fact, as it were. Metaphysicians claim to know what they cannot know, and as we learn from Diotima's warning about fools in the *Symposium*, believing you know what you (don't realize you) don't know is dangerous. But does this danger in itself de-legitimize metaphysics? There are, of course, lots of dangerous things that are worth doing despite any dangers that might be attendant upon their pursuit. The lesson of courage is neither to give into our fears nor to ignore them but to learn to cope with that about which we are rightly fearful. It is a lesson that teaches eternal vigilance, not defeat. Either there is something that human beings are (or "are like") or there is not. But both of the possible answers are potentially "metaphysical" in the sense that the critics mean it. Any answer is dangerous. Life is dangerous. But that is no argument against metaphysics and is actually evidence for acknowledging the ineluctability of metaphysics. Reality is fearsome, but that does not mean we ought to (or even can) recoil from it. Reality is also awesome, awe-inspiring, and to paraphrase Aristotle (without falsifying or disagreeing), philosophy, which is metaphysics, begins in awe.

In order to address two powerful would-be opponents to metaphysics, allow me to refer to Jean Grondin's biography [12] of Hans-Georg Gadamer (the hermeneuticist) as he describes the latter's debate, such as it was, with Jacques Derrida (the deconstructor). Grondin does a nice job in few words of characterizing the two thinkers' points of view. First, Derrida and deconstruction. Derrida's grammatology held that

there is no meaning beyond the signifiers but only a ceaseless deferring of meaning, which is never accessible outside the signs projecting only the illusion of its presence. We are as it were 'imprisoned' within a pre-given sign system that we never entirely understand; only within it do we understand, find meaning, and experience truth. Truth and meaning are never given inde-

pendent of a sign system. Thus the task is to deconstruct, where possible, the pre-determinations of the linguistic framework, so as not to be misled by them. A respectable ethos of ideology critique, then, lies very much as the heart of deconstruction.... [13]

I want to note the end or aim of deconstruction, according to this view of deconstruction (which seems accurate to me): "The task is to deconstruct, where possible, the predeterminations of the linguistic framework, so as not to be misled by them." What could "misled" really mean here? It can only make sense to worry about whether one might be being misled if one could be *rightly* led. What would it mean to be *rightly* led? To be *misled*, according to deconstruction, is to think that one's truths and the institutions that spring from them and in turn reinforce them have dropped from the heavens fully formed, that they reflect and reproduce and hence are the way things are and must be. To think that is to be misled. Truths and their corresponding institutions have a history, a genealogy, a contingency that is masked by "metaphysics' hypostatization." It is the false claim that these contingent constructions are necessary and unchanging (metaphysical things). That is what is false. Believing that is to be misled. But where ought we to be led? If this is the wrong path then what is the right path? If there is no right path, then there are no wrong paths. If there is no place you mean to go, then any map will do, because no route could be wrong. But deconstruction has "a respectable ethos of ideology critique" at its heart. So there is a motive. We do not wish to be misled. Who does? But now we must tread carefully. If there is no right road, then I might as well stick to the one I'm on if it should turn out that only Jacques Derrida happens to have a problem with it. As a flesh and blood man myself, I can have whatever problems I choose or that choose me, and they might not be identical with Derrida's. If my path works well enough for me, who is Derrida to warn me off of it? But what if Derrida does in fact think there is a right path (or a right-er path)? Then we need to know what it is. It can be framed negatively: there are no timeless, eternal things; as Heraclitus taught, "all is flux." But this is a claim about the *all*, which is metaphysics, which is about the way things are, now and forever, without change. All is contingent just means that contingency is a metaphysical character of reality, and as real beings

ourselves, it is that with which we need to cope (and not cower in the face of). The enemy here is finality, the idea that metaphysics, in grasping for the timeless and unchanging, is hoping to put an end to something. But what about the idea of, shall we call it, *contingent necessity*? A paradox? An oxymoron? Or is it a metaphysical insight? If all is construction and all is susceptible to deconstruction, then deconstruction is not adequate to ideology critique in some sort of final way, either. Say we realize that some particular institution has a genealogy and serves some interests and not others and could be deconstructed. So what? Unless you have some idea of better or improvement, you have made a claim equivalent to “everything is made of matter.” What does that even tell us, who are men and women of flesh and blood who have to live? There is in fact no praxis lying behind deconstruction, nor does it arise out of praxis. It just claims that things do not have a final set meaning. To put it in the terms of Richard Rorty (and in opposition to his view), no one can take up an ironic stance with regard to the whole of one’s life. My life is contingent, perhaps, but given that it is my life it has a necessity about it that is inalienable.

And what about Gadamer’s hermeneutics? Grondin explains that

Gadamer had to show that the experience of meaning that he was talking about has nothing metaphysical about it. For hermeneutics too there is no such thing as a final, fixed (metaphysical) meaning, only a meaning borne along by unpredictable effective history in which we stand and which we can try to deconstruct. [...Gadamer said] ‘It seems to me that aspects of Derrida’s conceptual formations such as dissemination might be viewed as structurally similar to historically effected consciousness, or *différance* to fusions of horizons’ [14].

Grondin continues:

Derrida was suspicious of the hermeneutic concept of horizon, because it seemed too close to an all-encompassing *horizon* of meaning [i.e., it seemed “metaphysical” to Derrida]. In 1993, however, Gadamer tried to explain to Derrida that the horizon is

rather something that is never reached. [...] Gadamer’s universalist hermeneutics was never meant to imply that we can understand everything but at most that we are beings that try to understand and often enough fail. Indeed, it is precisely because we fail in principle that we are always in search of understanding and meaning. This failure is one manifestation of the human finitude that Derrida too wants to insist on. [...] Yet [Gadamer] must have felt challenged by Derrida’s charge that the will to understand operates by way of (imperialistically) appropriating otherness to the understander. For, crudely put, do I understand *the other* when I understand him? Or is it precisely then that I miss understanding him. In fact, does not the gap in understanding, the jump beyond understanding, get us further along? [15]

Grondin explains that Gadamer’s thoughts were honed by this engagement with Derrida and deconstruction such that in his later work he came to think that “it is not the case that understanding can always find words for what we are trying to comprehend. Rather, ‘we can never say everything that we would like to say’—from now on, this is the ‘highest principle of philosophical hermeneutics.’ Because we are finite, language always leaves us in the lurch. In this situation, hermeneutic openness to the other—to the possibility that the other is right—succeeds in achieving a new dimension, indeed a dimension of world-historical importance.” [16] Taking hermeneutics in its widest possible sense as strategies for understanding in terms of an horizon (perhaps ever-receding), then hermeneutics is metaphysically engaged. The deconstructively chastened Gadamer is still making claims to the way things are. “We can never say everything we’d like to say.” That’s just the way things are and they are not going to change. Things have a *necessary contingency*. A paradox? An oxymoron? Or is it a metaphysical insight?

Perhaps I am concluding that there is actually less squabble here than one who attends philosophy conferences might think. All these philosophers, careful as they may be, are engaged in metaphysics in the sense the term has always had. Problems arise not from its formal ends but from the contingent ends of its practitioners and its would-be critics, all

persons of flesh and blood. The objectionable end is the end of ending metaphysics, either by concluding it, as if your articulation of it is undeconstructable, or by attempting to avoid it all together. One side purports to finish it; the other side purports to finish it off. But it is, for us men and women of flesh and blood, never finished until we, ourselves, are finished. The end of metaphysics is death.

And now one more turn: The end of metaphysics is death in the sense of the finish line. But what about a claim that says the end in the sense of aim or purpose of metaphysics is death? On a cursory reading of that claim, I'd say stay away from metaphysics if you want to live! But our own end (finish line) is death. It is the way things are. Eventual not-being is the way things necessarily and unchangingly are. They say the only sure things in life are death and taxes, but if we were to elect an anarcho-capitalist libertarian government, not even taxes would be a sure thing. But death remains. Necessarily. We are all already as good as dead. Metaphysics might seem deadly (at least deadly boring) to some people because of their aim to bring things to an end when in fact all is flux. This would, as I have argued, not be an argument to avoid metaphysics (that can't be done) but to avoid this interpretation of metaphysics and to avoid adopting this end of metaphysics. Instead, we could adopt the vision of metaphysics as a way (*meth'hodos*) of living as men and women of flesh and blood. This vision would see metaphysics, as life-affirming, as contingency-affirming. It would see the necessary as contingent because of the necessity of contingency. It would not be seeking closure but living in the time before closure, at the beginning or principle of that closure called death. Metaphysics would be a kind of virtue, perhaps the highest virtue. Metaphysics, which is philosophy, would be about the love (which is open, not closed) of wisdom, which we are driven to seek, each in our own way of flesh and blood.

Thus metaphysics is ineluctable. As a practical matter, of course, one could always do something else beside metaphysical reflection. And should one take it up, one could always reject certain metaphysical systems or positions or resist certain aims that other thinkers might have for metaphysics. But if one wants to understand the *all*, the *whole*, even if just of one's own life, sooner or later one comes down to those questions that have constituted the core of metaphysics. If one is honest with oneself, as a

person of flesh and blood—and who engages in any scientific, artistic, philosophical, or spiritual pursuit if not persons of flesh and blood?—one will find oneself in one's essential nature (*physis*) always in the midst of (*meta*) metaphysical questioning.

6 On the Parallels between Metaphysics and Transdisciplinarity

In his 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx complained that philosophers had only been interpreting the world but that the point is to change it. Let us, for simplicity's sake, take this complaint to be a sign of tension between theory and practice. Marx was saying that all along philosophy took itself to be attempting to see (*theoria*) how things are. By "are" is meant the way things not only are but have always been and will always be, that fundamentally how things are is eternal and unchanging, despite the flux of everyday experience. That was to be the mission of philosophy, to penetrate the flux of experience to discover the eternal, to pierce through the *changing* to the underlying *unchanging*. In other words, philosophy is metaphysics. The presupposition is that one could know the way things are without affecting the way things are. The presupposition is that things are, at bottom, *unchanging*, and so not changeable in principle. Thus human appropriation of reality leaves reality "untouched," so to speak. Things are *of necessity*.

And of this, Marx complained. The basis of his complaint can be traced to the "Copernican revolution" of Kant, to the turn to transcendental subjectivity, to the notion that reason does not "discover" a world ready made but in fact *makes* a world according to its own structure. I.e., reason forms a world for reason according to reason. Still, Kant did not view philosophy's mission as being to change the world. The structure or reason was *set* (eternal and unchanging), and so the world of reason's making was also set. This is the genius of Kantian thought: it is a bulwark against the skepticism that stems ineluctably from Humean empiricism. We can know things (and hope for things and know what we ought to do) because, though the world is always for us rational beings the phenomenal world, that phenomenal world is the way it *is* for us (and the way it would be without us or for that which is other than

us is unknowable and absurd). Even for Hegel, who introduce history into philosophy, who, in effect, put the structure of reason into motion, still recognized that, as he put it, the Owl of Minerva only takes flight at dusk [17]. In other words, philosophy comes along after the fact to see that what has become must have been. Philosophy's mission is to understand, to simply stand under the sway of how things are and appropriate it.

But not for Marx. For Marx, the point of philosophy is to change the world, to see that the world is always a world we make and that we must be prospective rather than, as always had been the case, retrospective. It implies a non- or anti-metaphysical position, a sense that things do not have to be as they are and always have been and always will be. We need not be mere spectators but actors.

Old habits die hard, however, and it is at least arguable (and likely probable) that historical materialism still harbors *necessity* within it, even in its revolutionary pronouncements (the so-called "inevitability of communism," e.g.). But if Marxist-inspired thought were pushed to logical limits, then we'd have to admit that, if the world needs to be changed, there is not, in fact, the guiding star to lead us in the way of change. In other words, if the world is as plastic as this position would have to hold, then the malleability of the world would have to be truly infinite. In still other words, we would be free to change it in any way and no one way would have any preeminence over another. In the words of Sartre, we would be in "despair." For Sartre, *despair* "means that we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible," [18]. But for Sartre—at least early Sartre—the "sum of the probabilities" and what is "feasible" would be freely determined by our will. Despair simply means a radical freedom for which, absurdly but inescapably, we are fully responsible. In short, we can change the world any way we want, but we lack a guiding star to show the way. Literally, a *dis-astrous* condition [19].

But what if philosophy made still another turn? The advent of philosophy was characterized by seeking wisdom as a kind of knowledge for knowledge's sake, a knowing without doing. The full implications of the modern turn led to a kind of practice, a pragmatism, a doing. But in its disavowal of metaphysics—thought to be a condition of non-doing—

modern practice comes down to doing without knowing, a sometimes quite sophisticated and impressive yet nevertheless mindless doing. But if, in a dialectical turn, in a kind of an *Aufhebung* of the pre-modern and modern worldviews, we come to understand that we can only know by changing and change by knowing. In other words, what if philosophy were simply to be praxis? For reconsider the tension described earlier between "theory" (*theoria, sophia*), on the one hand, and "practice" (*techne, phronesis*), on the other. In his functional analysis of the human soul, Aristotle distinguishes the rational functions that have as their object the immutable things (*nous, episteme, sophia*) from the rational functions that have as their object the things which change or that which may lead to change (*techne, phronesis*). But, for the modern critic, each of these functions (*ergon*) when functioning or actualized (*energeia*) remains a doing which is a thinking, a reasoning which may lead to other action (through deliberation and decision and choice) but which is, in the end, a function of (better or worse) *theoria*. There is something *prior* to thinking for Aristotle, and for a doing to count as an action it must be deliberate or deliberated. For the modern, the point is to *do*, that our actions, in effect, *be* our thinking, that our acts do our thinking for us. This is *technology*, the *logos* or reasoning or rationality of the *techne*, the skillful doing. It is inevitable, on this conception, that technology lift off from its being in rational beings and become a rationality of a sort in itself. One can readily see this without having read Heidegger's reflections on technology in how information technology re-arranges and re-patterns the thinking of its users. But one could see it already in the mechanistic manner in which Marxist thought quickly and inevitably became a party ideological practice that subsumed adherents and opponents alike. For all its sophistication it was nevertheless a mindless doing.

Further, in a deep sense, the disciplinary fragmentation with which we have become ensnared is a function of this mindless doing, a doing for doing's sake that parallels a knowing for knowing's sake. Neither emphasis has been salutary, and indeed it seems fair to say that the former has been much more dangerous for humanity than the latter, despite the latter's drawbacks. We now face issues of environmental sustainability caused by the progression of mindless doing. At a deep level, this can be traced to the disavowal of metaphysics.

But this disavowal arose for understandable historical reasons. While Aristotle's distinguishing between the dual objects of thought (the mutable and immutable) did not imply a real distinction or possible separation (a point missed in the alleged tension between theory and practice, between knowing and doing), Aristotle did saddle himself with presuppositions (inherited from his teacher Plato) about the essence of reality, that reality consists of substantial things with unchanging and eternal essences, thereby larding *becoming* and *change* with an inescapable (and misleading) *stasis*. And this had all the practical, not to mention political, ramifications that its modern critics complain about.

The insight that this discussion provides is that a recovery of metaphysics is necessary to habilitate genuine *praxis*, a practice that is not a mindless but a mindful doing, not an ideological driven mechanistic practice, but a genuinely thought-filled doing and an active, actualizing knowing. The separation of thought and action leads to acting in such a way as to compartmentalize knowing, i.e., to the vulgar essentialization of departments of knowledge and the generation of academic silos of disciplines with their border guards at the ready. Thus the advent of metaphysical *praxis* or, better, metaphysically informed *praxis* and praxically informed metaphysics, demands the concomitance of transdisciplinarity.

I do not wish to reduce transdisciplinarity to metaphysics as the latter has been carried out in academic philosophy departments. Clearly, even a cursory look at the literature stamped with "transdisciplinary" belies such a reduction. And I certainly do not mean to plant my flag in the term "transdisciplinarity" and claim it for my own. It is obvious to anyone who cares to look that the term is used in a variety of senses. But I do wish to say, first, that I do not think—despite all the texts, journals, conferences, research projects, and so on that have been generated in its name—that transdisciplinarity is another academic discipline. It may *masquerade* as a discipline or be festooned with all the trappings of one. It may even be that some desire that it become one, such that one could study its "methodologies" and be awarded degrees and be certified as a "transdisciplinarian"—it might turn out this would make a good career move. But it will not change the fact that transdisciplinarity is not a discipline at all. It's very name betrays it. As noted earlier, transdisciplinarity operates by means of disciplines,

between disciplines, and beyond disciplines. And this means that it operates by means of, between, and beyond the institutional practices that manifest disciplinary divisions. And that means that transdisciplinarity cannot be domesticated strictly within the academy. It is not *essentially* academic. And if it is not essentially academic, then it is not strictly beholden to the academy's rationality. This does not mean—although many might argue the point—that transdisciplinarity is "irrational." It is, indeed, *transrational*, a rationality according to the logic(s) of the *trans*.

And in this it is parallel to philosophy, which is metaphysics. Although we treat philosophy/metaphysics as *if* it were just one discipline among others, that is an illusion. "Philosophy" has been domesticated within the academy for economic and political reasons, for purposes of command and control. But domesticated "philosophy" is not *philosophy* at all but a discourse *about* philosophy. The academy is a "knowledge factory," but the very name *philosophy* shows its aim to be wisdom and not knowledge. Wisdom may be thought of as *metaknowledge* or *metascience*, again, according to the logic of the *trans*. The confusion of these two is the undoing of philosophy and a barrier to wisdom.

Both proponents and opponents of philosophy/metaphysics have misconceived the relationship between the sciences and *metascience*. Some proponents have tried to see the difference as demanding a separation, giving the sense that philosophy/metaphysics can live on without the sciences. This leave its opponents with the sense that philosophy/metaphysics is "otherworldly" and irremediably abstract, and thus can be safely discarded. The sciences alone will suffice. And some proponents, chastened by this criticism, hoped to reconfigure philosophy/metaphysics to simply *be* a science, as if an act of humility before the grandeur of the sciences. Philosophy/metaphysics needs to be defended both from its (mono-) cultured despisers *and* its well-meaning but misled friends.

If I may put it this way, what we need is an *undisciplined* philosophy/metaphysics in order that it might serve as *transdisciplinary metascience*. But this is not in any way to say that when it comes to philosophy just "anything goes"! There is a method to philosophy/metaphysics, just as there is a method to transdisciplinarity. A *meta hodos*: a way or journey along side of, after, and beyond. It is the method of

more. It is a way of knowing *more*. *More* knowledge and *more than* knowledge (but not other than knowledge). It is a way of attending to the ancient saying, *meleta to pan*, of “taking into care beings as a whole,” as Heidegger initially translates the Greek. [20] It is a way of getting at the *all* or the *whole*, knowing that that is an infinite, open horizon, knowing that there will always (structurally) be *more*. And there is a rigor to this way, as rigorous (at least) as any found in disciplinary practices. But in another way, a way that is, let me call it, “an-archic,” a way that denies there is a single, containable, manageable, *arché* or principle or foundation to knowing/doing. We are so used to, culturally and institutionally speaking, the way of the disciplines (analysis and fragmentation) that we no longer understand this other way (an anarchic holism or synthesis without homogenization, reductionism, or leveling). We must relearn it.

7 Conclusion

In this essay I have argued for understanding metaphysics as a way of getting at the *whole*, the *all*, or the *more* that transdisciplinary thought endeavors to pursue. I have tried to think transdisciplinarity as essentially oriented by metaphysical praxis or practically informed metaphysics, without however delineating the elements of a metaphysics that would be adequate to this vision. That is a project for another day, of course. For now, I can only suggest that there are post-modern critical engagements with metaphysics that hold resources for such a project. These might include Whiteheadian process thought and Xavier Zubiri’s philosophy of reality; speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, et. al.); Basarab Nicolescu’s scientifically informed epistemology and alternative logics; Roberto Poli’s conceptions of levels of reality (influenced by N. Hartmann); and even non-academically-disciplined thought such as Ken Wilber’s integral philosophy might prove, if critically engaged, fruitful for honing metaphysical praxis. And a philosophy of the *beyond* (*meta-*, *trans-*) would not be worthy of the name if it failed to engage that which is beyond philosophy (new sciences, spirituality, etc.).

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