

DOING METAPHYSICS AS IF KANT NEVER HAPPENED

An interview with John Hawthorne

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Metafysikk og dens tilgrensende nabo, fysikkfilosofi, er i dag sprudlende fagområder innen den analytiske tradisjonen. I affinitet til denne metafysiske renessansen ble det i april 2006 holdt et kurs i metafysikk på PhD-nivå ved Universitetet i Oslo med filosofene Timothy Williamson, Frank Arntzenius og John Hawthorne. Vi i Filosofisk supplement var da så heldige at vi fikk samtale med John Hawthorne om hans interesser og arbeider innen feltet. Hawthorne er professor I ved Rutgers University, og han har til tross for sin unge alder allerede gjennom en årrekke beskjeftiget seg med metafysiske gåter og de grunnleggende problemene i tilværelsen. Sin innsats på feltet har han knyttet opp mot filosofiske størrelser som David Lewis og G. W. Leibniz, et arbeid som nå er blitt gjort tilgjengelig i den nyutkomne samlingen *Metaphysical Essays*. De senere årene har Hawthorne dessuten gjort seg bemerket innen epistemologi og språkfilosofi med boken *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Her blir ulike posisjoner og problemer i forbindelse med vitenbegrepet gitt grundige analyser og diskusjon. I dette intervjuet berører vi begge disse sentrale problemflatene i John Hawthornes univers.

This week you give a course on metaphysics here at the University of Oslo. Which metaphysical question do you find particularly interesting and important?

There are a number of questions I find interesting which have been around in various forms since antiquity. Questions about when things compose other things, questions about what is necessary and what is possible, questions about the relationship between mind and matter and questions about the nature of time. These are all very abstract questions about the structure of reality.

Why do you find these questions important or interesting?

Why do we find anything interesting? Obviously there are personal explanations to such a question. For some reason there is a joy for me to think in a very abstract way about the structure of reality and that is an end in itself. I do not think I have to justify it by saying things like it helps me build bridges or get to heaven or whatever, rather it is sufficient to say metaphysics is something that I am drawn to. The questions have all got a certain kind of generality to them and there is a longstanding history of dealing with them in philosophy, so I think they are natural subjects for fascination. I do not worry too much about justifying my interest to people who just are not taken by metaphysics.

Do you see any relations between these different metaphysical issues or are they completely independent of one another?

Metaphysics is a bit of a fluffy term and I have not got any interesting way of delineating it from other philosophical issues. There is this vague idea of metaphysics being a general inquiry into the structure of reality, but when you put it that way there are a lots of points of contacts with for instance physics or logic. There is nothing exciting I could say about how one question relates to another. It all depends on the different questions asked. Of course there would be connections, but we will need to look at particular pairs. For example what does an inquiry into possibility and necessity have to do with the relationship between mind and matter? There are some things you could say about the way questions about mind and matter precede that again relies on concepts having to do with possibility and necessity, for instance if you where to ask whether it is possible to have a mind that is not material, or if the structure of the material world necessitate the structure of the mental world. There are concepts used in one corner that are used to ask questions in another corner, but there is nothing I can say in a general way about the relationship between these questions that is going to help much. The interesting stuff is often in the details.

You mention the issue of how the world is composed and how things compose other things. Could you say a bit about your take on these questions?

Well, let me point to a few questions about parts and wholes that I have some interest in. One question of interest is whether things have *ultimate parts*. There are for instance some parts that themselves have parts. An arm is a part of me, and my fingers or my elbow are themselves parts of my arm and so on. An ultimate part of an object would be a part of an object that itself has no parts; it is partless. We have got two competing pictures of the world that come into view. One according to which everything in the world is built of ultimate parts and another picture where there are parts all the way down. According to the second picture everything itself has parts, i.e. there are no parts of things that do not themselves have parts. This second conception has come to be called *the gunky conception*.

You can ask this question in a range of different areas. Take space for instance: One vision of space is that space is built out of ultimate parts, or points that is. A region of space is literally composed out of points. Another picture of space is the one according to which every part of space is an extended region and every extended region has extended sub regions, and where there are no ultimate parts of space. This is because every bit of space is ex-

tended, and every extended region of space has smaller sub regions and parts. So there is a sort of cool little contrast at least. Then one interesting thing to think about is what sort of difference it might make. How will it affect our conceptions of the way we do physics in the end? How will those different kinds of foundational structures ramify how we think about other things? It is not obvious that this is a question worth thinking about. It *is* the sort of thing I find interesting to reflect on, though. That is one issue in the vicinity of parts and wholes.

Another interesting question is whether you can have two things built out of the same parts at the same time, a debate that has gone on since antiquity. There are some people who think you could have these little atoms and at the same time they make both a statue and a lump of clay, and where the statue is not the lump of clay. If so there will be two objects made at a given time of exactly the same parts. There are of course people who think that in the end there is something wrong and really darkly incoherent with the idea of two distinct things being built out of the very same parts. Therefore they have tried to frame metaphysical systems of the material world that avoid the positing of two different things consisting of the very same parts. Wherever there appear to be two things they will either find different parts or say it is an illusion and the same thing after all.

When you were in Oslo a year ago giving a talk about the gunky view you were caught saying that you tended to do metaphysics as if there had been no Immanuel Kant. Do you stand by this and can you explain what you had in mind?

I cannot remember exactly what I had in mind but I think this is partly what I had in mind: Kant thought that we can explain our knowledge of the world a heck of a lot better if we do something analogous to the Copernican turn. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) he wanted us to somehow think of the shape of reality as constituted by the categories with which the mind thinks instead of thinking of the mind as being responsible to the world it thinks about, i.e. forming ideas that either do or do not correspond to an independently existing reality. The short version of what I think about that is that it was a really bad idea. All of this is wrong! In fact I think everything that Kant said about this is totally wrong! The whole thing was misdirection in the history of philosophy. Well that's where my money goes, anyway. What Kant said in the vicinity of this is a mixture of things that are wrong and things that do not even make sense, and I think the whole impulse to try to make sense of our knowledge of the world by thinking of the world as being somehow the construct of the mind is not a very good one. I am not saying that Kant was all bad.

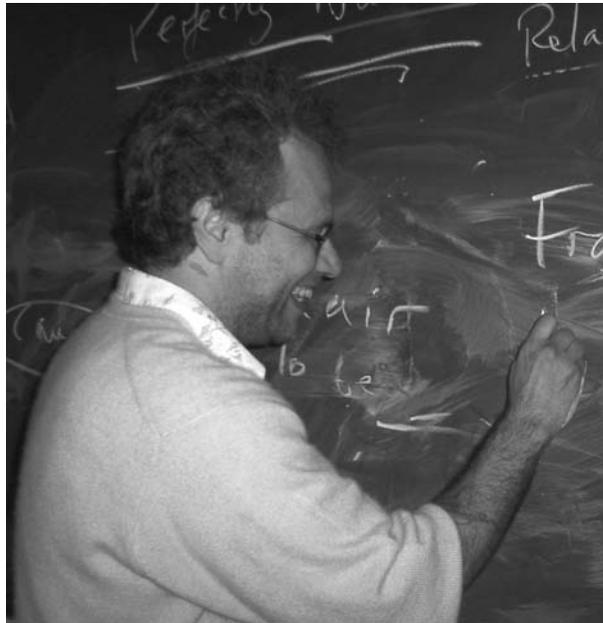
There are some good ideas buried in the mess. Just ignore all the stuff about the Copernican turn and you will find some good things in there.

This is not to say I want to be dogmatic or hyper-confident about my views. You just got to hope for the best.

Historically, people have been very sceptical of doing metaphysics. Would you say there are no general problems doing metaphysics?

One thing to remember is that if you are going to say that metaphysics is garbage you had better have some way of distinguishing metaphysics from other stuff. Historically people who came along and said that metaphysics is garbage found themselves with the problem of saying what is metaphysics and what is not, and they realized that they did not have very useful criteria. When you think of metaphysics as a general inquiry into the structure of reality you do not understand what it would mean to say: “Well, I’m sceptical about all of that.” There really is no clear point where metaphysics ends and the foundations of physics begin, and no one goes around saying that the foundations of physics are all garbage. If you look at what Isaac Newton was doing, in the late 17th and at the beginning of the 18th century, he described himself as doing natural philosophy. He did not give any sense of there being a distinction between metaphysics and the foundations of science. What happened was that some areas of foundational science tended to become more and more mathematical and technical, so in the end it was just impossible to do everything at once.

I think the whole idea of metaphysics being empty but science being all right rests on a deep misconception of things. There is no obvious sense in which I do something really different when I am doing metaphysics. I mean, I am simply thinking about general questions about the structure of reality, and insofar as physics seems relevant I would like to learn a little bit of physics, and insofar as logic helps I will do a bit of that. It does not mean anything to me when someone comes along and say that they are sceptical about metaphysics. They have probably read too much Kant to begin with.



As long as we already have touched upon the history of philosophy; it seems that the philosophy of Leibniz is something you could and actually have been doing some work on. How does he fit into your worldview?

It is true that Leibniz is the historical figure that I have studied the most. Why have I studied him most? Well, of the philosophers of that period he stands out to me as the person that thought most about metaphysics. He was creative and he brought together technical sophistication with a kind of weird imagination. That makes him refreshing and interesting to engage with. Leibniz was struggling with a bunch of foundational issues, at the technical end about the nature of continuity, the structure of space and time, and what human freedom comes to. But he also struggled with composition, how to think about compo-

site objects and the questions about ultimate parts and what is essential and not. He was just really smart and engaged with the kind of questions I find interesting. There seems to be more you could learn from him than reading for instance John Locke. Locke was not very good at metaphysics, basically. He might have been good at some things, but I do not think you are going to learn a heck of a lot metaphysics by reading him. Then you will learn a lot more by reading Leibniz. He just had more imagination, more technical sophistication and he was thinking harder and

more carefully about foundational questions that are often in the intersection between physics and metaphysics. I also had some friends working with Leibniz. You know there are always social reasons too to why we get interested in one thing rather than another.

I think we should get in a few questions about epistemology as well. In your monograph Knowledge and Lotteries (2003) you speak about the lottery paradox. Could you explain what that is about?

There is a literature on a thing called the lottery paradox, but I do not think it is quite right to say that my book is about the lottery paradox, so let me instead say what kinds of puzzles I was interested in. Philosophers since Descartes have been obsessed with certain kinds of sceptical puzzles. Am I a brain in vat? Am I a spook just being

deceived by a demon into thinking that I have a body? Am I dreaming? Am I insane? My book is motivated by a range of different sceptical puzzles that are very natural to state and do not need any kind of weird philosophical temperament to get the hang of, and yet are very hard to solve.

I start with the thought that you get a lottery ticket, which you do not know whether it is a winner or a loser. That seems very natural. But then you start to realize that all sorts of walks of life are a lottery in its own very obvious ways. You say you know where you are going to be, say in bar or something tonight. On reflection we all know that we are all participants in *the great heart attack lottery*. Some people are sadly going to drop dead suddenly without a warning, like in this very afternoon. And just as we do not know whose tickets are the winners or losers in the New York state lottery, it seems totally obvious that we do not know the winners and losers from the great heart attack lottery. This consideration can easily make you think that you do not know whether you are going to drop dead this afternoon. But if you do not know whether or not you are going to die this afternoon, then how can you possibly know that you are going to be in the bar tonight? Just by pointing out totally obvious analogies between lotteries and various walks of life it seems that, without resorting to Cartesian tactics, all our knowledge starts to disappear before our eyes. That is what I was interested in.

You write in Knowledge and lotteries that lottery style considerations may prove a dialectically more effective tool for the sceptic than traditional brain-in-a-vat or deceiving demon style thought experiments. What do you mean by that?

Well, you get these pretentious epistemologies that give various kinds of answers to why I know there is a physical world. They give you various answers and they say, despite what the Cartesian sceptic says, that we do know there is a physical world. When you look at the very boring kinds of puzzles I just gave and look at these epistemologist's answers to Cartesian scepticism, they do not seem to help very much. Do you tell me I *do* know who is going to drop dead from a heart attack? Or that I *do* know I'm not going to drop dead from a heart attack? That sounds totally stupid, saying: "I know I'm not going to drop dead of a heart attack tonight". That's what I mean by dialectically effective.

The lottery paradoxes then come along with these little stories about how to resist the Cartesian sceptic. I was noticing that a lot of the moves do not really seem to help much with my puzzles, and that it sounds stupid trying to use them. And there are structural problems that make it hard to see what a good answer would look like to

these sceptical puzzles. In particular, one very natural and compelling thought is that if you know A and you know B, you are in a position to know A and B, just by *conjunction introduction*. But that alone makes a lot of trouble. One reason in particular is that it seems that we cannot know that a particular ticket will loose, since if we can know of one given ticket that it will loose, then for any other loser, we can know that it will loose too. But then by conjunction introduction we can know that they will all loose. So it seems that we can know which ticket will win just by knowing all the losers and deducing that the remaining one will win, assuming of course that there is one winner. Of course, no one thinks one can come to know which ticket will win the lottery this way. The conjunction introduction extends knowledge and that puts incredible pressure towards conceding that you do not know the individual premises.

Similar in these other areas of inquiry, if your interlocutor agrees that conjunction introduction is a good way of extending knowledge, then you can use similar tactics to really make a lot of trouble if they start claiming that they do know various things. If I know I won't have a heart attack and I know that my friend won't, then I know that we both won't and if we keep adding up those, we will soon know of a whole community that it won't have a heart attack tonight. But there is in fact overwhelmingly objectively probable that one of them will. There are sorts of moves like that related to conjunction introduction that have a lot of argumentative force, but those moves are not so obviously available to the sceptic in the traditional brain-in-a-vat discussion.

Do you want to sketch your own solution to the lottery paradox?

I want to be clear about one thing: philosophical areas often intrigue me where, after working on them for a while, it starts to look like all views are bad. And I think this is an area where you can see after a while that whatever the truth is it will sound really weird. It sounds weird to say we do not know anything, but on the other hand, all attempts to solve these puzzles are pretty weird. I try to lay down the options and say what the costs are. One of these options that I explore is one that has not been explored that much. And if you put a gun to my head and force me to choose one of them, I would probably go for that one. That is what I actually say, but then people hear me as saying that I defend this view. There is a bit of difference between saying that if you put a gun to my head and force me I would choose, out all these bad views, the one I hate the least, and saying that this is the view I defend.

The idea I explore is that knowledge is more directly

tied than we think to practical interests. The thought proceeds by thinking there is some connection between knowledge and practical reasoning. If you know something, then you should be able to use it as a premise in a practical reasoning, as a basis for acting. One thing that is particularly weird about the thought that we always know whether or not we are going to be on a vacation the next year, and therefore we come to know whether we are going to be alive the next year, is related to practical reasoning. If that were always available as a premise in our reasoning, then we would have a very good reason to turn down life insurances. Say you are offered life insurance and then you think to yourself: "Well actually I'm going to the Bahamas next year, so I'm not going to die before that. Obviously then life insurance is a waste of money."

When someone reasons like this we think it ridiculous. And when asked what is wrong with this reasoning, we say that he does not know whether or not he will be going to the Bahamas next year.

What I was thinking was, putting it crudely; that in that practical environment of being offered life insurance you do not know whether or not you will be in the Bahamas next year. But maybe in other kinds of practical environments, where you do not have to make decisions about whether to sign a life insurance, knowledge comes rather more easily, so you do know. If knowledge is sensitive to one's practical deliberate environment in that sense, there are ways of allowing us knowledge without licensing ridiculous kinds of practical reasoning. But let me emphasize that this is, just like all the other options, a very bad view.

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